

Illinois State University ISU ReD: Research and eData

Theses and Dissertations

5-22-2015

The Storm Still Echoes: Suspense and Ambivalence as a Way of Life

Shailen Mishra

Illinois State University, shailen.mishra@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mishra, Shailen, "The Storm Still Echoes: Suspense and Ambivalence as a Way of Life" (2015). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 419.

This Thesis and Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact ISURed@ilstu.edu.

THE STORM STILL ECHOES: SUSPENSE AND AMBIVALENCE
AS A WAY OF LIFE

Shailen Mishra

241 Pages

August 2015

This dissertation is comprised of three interrelated components that inquire into two themes: the epistemological and aesthetic merit of narrative suspense, and the generative potential of constraint-based writing. In the opening chapter, titled “Doubt in Perpetuity: Rethinking Suspense as a Mode of Aesthetics, and an Epistemological Inquiry,” I undertake a theoretical inquiry to prove that suspense can be a rich analytical device to study complex aesthetics of writers. I theorize suspense at its elemental level and from an epistemological standpoint to prove that suspense is not simply a plot-level concept of “what happens next.” Instead, by analyzing particular scenes from Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I attempt to prove that complex aesthetics of authors like Márquez and Kafka can be productively studied through suspense. After the opening chapter, the dissertation turns to the creative section, which is a novel set in the coastal state of Orissa in India. Temporally, the novel is a lead up to October 29, 1999, the day a devastating cyclone hit the coastal front of Orissa, claiming more than ten thousand lives. At the heart of the story is a dysfunctional, middle-class family, whose matriarch is a self-proclaimed demigod and who has amassed formidable influence through notorious and unsavory

means. The challenge to her meteoric rise comes from her youngest son, the narrator of the story. As the threat of the storm looms, the fates of the characters and the town are increasingly cast in grave peril. Through the elements of foreshadowing, premonition, prophesy, superstition, and supernatural, I attempt to sustain and enrich the momentum of suspense in the narrative. Some of these aesthetic maneuvers are directly informed by my analysis in the theoretical section. Another, important aspect of my creative work is its application of constraint, which is derived from the literary principles of Oulipo, a French literary movement that started in 1960s. Constraint is a self-selected lexical, syntactic, and structural restriction that guides the text generation process. After demonstrating such an example in my creative work, I transition to the pedagogy section of this dissertation, where I theorize and attempt to prove through empirical evidence that writing constraint can be a highly effective invention and revision technique alongside more traditional learning methods in creative writing classrooms.

THE STORM STILL ECHOES: SUSPENSE AND AMBIVALENCE
AS A WAY OF LIFE

SHAILEN MISHRA

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2015

© 2015 Shailen Mishra

THE STORM STILL ECHOES: SUSPENSE AND AMBIVALENCE
AS A WAY OF LIFE

SHAILEN MISHRA

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Ricardo Cortez Cruz, Co-Chair

K. Aaron Smith, Co-chair

Rebecca Saunders

Krishna Manavalli

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been complete without the support and guidance of my committee members: Ricardo Cortez Cruz, K. Aaron Smith, Rebecca Saunders, and Krishna Manavalli. I am sincerely grateful for their encouragement, patience, and astute feedback. They pushed me toward rigorous thinking and ambitious challenges. Thanks to Ryan Clark and Irina Nersessova, who, as friends and colleagues, have been generous with their time and support during many apprehensive stages of completing this project. I am also appreciative of the valuable encouragement provided by Kirstin Hotelling Zona, Whitney Flanigan, John MacLean, and Prashant Krishnakumar. Also, thanks to my students who gave me permission to share their writings for the benefit of my research. My family has always been an unwavering source of support and joy for me. Their love for me cannot be reciprocated enough. Finally, my deepest gratitude is reserved for my interviewees in Orissa who shared their eyewitness accounts of the 1999 super cyclone, their trauma, and personal loss. There are too many of them to list here. But a part of this dissertation is dedicated to their fortitude and the memories of their loved ones and all the victims of the cyclone.

S.M.

CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CONTENTS	ii
CHAPTER	
I. DOUBT IN PERPETUITY: RETHINKING SUSPENSE AS A MODE OF AESTHETICS, AND AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY	1
Writers and Their Mode of Aesthetics	3
Elements of Suspense	9
Threat of Negative Outcome	10
Dramatic Irony	11
Epistemic Gap	13
Invitation to the Readers' Affective Investments and Their Manipulations	14
Analysis of Suspense	17
One Hundred Years of Solitude	17
The Metamorphosis	30
Conclusion	38
II. EPILOGUE	41
III. THE CLOWN RISES ON THE WEST	47
IV. THE BATTLE OF THE FISHES	66
V. A FLOWER NAMED FALL	98
VI. SAILORS OF THE SECOND SEA	119
VII. THE WRONG HAND OF THE BUTCHER	155

VIII.	NOT SO BAD TO BE CONSTRAINED AFTER ALL: WRITING CONSTRAINTS AS INVENTION AND REVISION STRATEGIES IN CREATIVE WRITING CLASSROOMS	171
	The Invention and Revision	177
	The Invention Process and Its Challenges	177
	Substantive vs. Limited Revision	181
	Oulipo and Constraints	185
	Constraints as a Teaching Strategy	195
	Self-Selected Constrained Writing Exercise	205
	Single-Scene Revision Exercise	211
	Conclusion	219
	REFERENCES	222
APPENDIX A:	Syllabus for ENG 247.02: Intermediate Creative Writing Fiction (Fall 2012)	229
APPENDIX B:	Instructions Given to Students for Story #1 Exercise	236
APPENDIX C:	Reflection Paper Prompt for Story #1 and Revision Assignments	239
APPENDIX D:	Guidelines for Revision Assignment	240

CHAPTER I

DOUBT IN PERPETUITY: RETHINKING SUSPENSE AS A MODE OF
AESTHETICS, AND AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Suspense can serve as a lens to study the aesthetics of writers. Suspense is not simply a narrative strategy to generate tension and hold the reader's attention; in fact, it can be an epistemic method, a way of inquiring knowledge. Though E. M. Forster and Roland Barthes were dismissive of the usefulness of suspense in storytelling and relegated its status to an agent of docility and status quo in the society, what is often missed in such criticism is that suspense produces "doubtful pause" in the reader. Though this doubt is ultimately resolved, the duration of suspense teaches the reader to challenge the given knowledge, develop skepticism, and suspend judgment (Levine 1-3). These epistemic practices were highly relevant in the context of early Victorian realism of the nineteenth century, when scientific experimentation heralded new findings and challenged preconceived notions. So the thinkers of that time encouraged people to suspend judgement and not jump to conclusion too soon because that would bring the line of inquiry to a premature end. Suspense as a narrative device then does not simply entertain but it might serve as a method to probe reality. So a writer's employment of suspense can be seen as a channel of inquiry he/she opens up for the reader in his/her text.

Two authors whose works allow for an exploration of suspense as critical engagement are Gabriel García Márquez and Franz Kafka. The aesthetics of the two authors are presented in their famous anti-realist styles, which have an aura of doubt or uncertainty about them that does not fully resolve. Since the real and unreal are inseparably intertwined in these styles, cumulative lines of inquiry perpetually tease the reader. Slippery state of knowledge and pervasive ambiguity in these two styles raises the question: what is the role of suspense in these two authors' aesthetics? If suspense is a method of epistemology as Caroline Levine claims, how would suspense may have worked as a narrative strategy to present the ambiguous reality of Kafka and Márquez's storyworlds? In the process of answering this question, my purpose in this essay is to establish suspense as a legitimate means to study intricate aesthetics of writers like Márquez and Kafka.

Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* will serve as the texts of inquiry here because both the narratives are highly illustrative of the anti-realist techniques of the respective authors. Suspense will be analyzed in the two texts by employing the fundamental elements of suspense namely the threat of a negative outcome, dramatic irony, epistemic gap, and the text's invitation to the reader's affective investment. This explorative exercise will demonstrate how Kafka and Márquez both followed and deviated from the conventions of suspense to open up an intriguing array of ambiguities in their narratives through an aesthetic that Tzevan Todorov called in his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* as "modern fantastic." Finally, such a study in aesthetics will hold value for creative writers on how to strategically deploy suspense to interweave a complex narrative.

Writers and Their Mode of Aesthetics

In functional terms, suspense is closely associated with pleasure. Seymour Chatman, quoting Sylvan Barnet et al., defines suspense as “a curious mixture of pain and pleasure” (59). For Lothar Mikos, the audience receives suspense more favorably because it provides “pleasurable experience” (48). Narrative theorist H. Porter Abbott characterizes suspense in his work *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* as the “pleasing ache of wanting to know *what has happened* or *what will happen next*” (160; original emphasis). These three references hint at a nuanced link between suspense and pleasure. This link is important to understand since pleasure is often used to undermine or “cheapen” the merit of suspense. The fact that suspense poses an anticipatory situation and the reader finds satisfaction in the successful closure of that anticipation, an entertainment value can be identified in suspense. But the source of pleasure is not limited to the closure of anticipation. Levine counters that pleasure’s link to suspense can be reformulated if we are willing to go as far back as the formative years of Victorian realism, when a new philosophical understanding of suspense gained appreciation.

Levine isolates a strand of “realism” in the mid-nineteenth century based on John Ruskin’s writings and other contemporary thinkers who were influenced by the value of “experimentation” in science. In order to test one’s guesses and hypotheses, one must conduct experiments with full suspension of judgment. So while waiting for the outcome of a test, one must endure the anxiousness or anticipations of the results, which may or may not confirm the original hypothesis. This intervening period of “doubtful pause” had significant implication in the theorization of suspense (Levine 3). Because suspense compelled one to hold back personal beliefs and prejudices and not rush to conclusion, it

was seen as essential to developing “habits of hesitation and uncertainty” (Levine 3). Thus, suspense came to be viewed as an epistemological method capable of challenging dogma, orthodoxy, or received knowledge. Further, the state of doubt and anticipation is characterized as a “pleasure in ignorance,” where readers “keenly look forward to a future that is postponed, enjoying the experience of doubt, the pleasures of what Ruskin calls ‘going on to know’” (9). In this case, the source of pleasure clearly shifts from outcome to the process (i.e. from the satisfaction of seeing entrenched beliefs reinstated to being in doubt and anticipation). Thus, the pleasure lies not in the certainty of knowledge but in the process of discovering it. In such a theoretical formulation, suspense foregrounds itself as an epistemological method, a way to inquire, a way to seek knowledge, or as Levine calls it a “serious pleasure” (10).

Such a philosophical attitude toward suspense was short-lived and for the later generation of realism writers like George Eliot and Henry James “the alliance of realism and suspense [was seen] as a hopelessly naive mimetic exercise” (199). Nevertheless, Levine argues that the epistemological purpose of suspense in Victorian realism is misunderstood and that suspense provides the reader a useful experience in skepticism. Surely, the emphasis on skeptical epistemology was not new to the Victorian era. Ancient philosophy gave rise to movements like Pyrrhonism and Academic Skepticism, which called into question the stability of any kind of knowledge. Even Modern Skepticism endorses an attitude of “doubt and suspense of judgement” toward knowledge (Hume 306). But Levine’s claim suggests that in the early Victorian realism the narrative purpose of suspense is more explicitly linked to skeptical epistemology.

If skepticism is advocated as a useful methodology to probe reality and challenge dogma, then one of the most robust representations of this principle might be located in the genres of Surrealism and Magical Realism. In such anti-realist styles, the absurd can be uncompromising, the mingling of conscious and unconscious inseparable, and the boundary between reality and dream irreverently blurred to challenge the certainty of knowledge. To inquire or to be in doubt becomes the aesthetic mode of these styles, or to invoke Todorov's term, the mode of "modern fantastic."

For Todorov, any narrative event that poses ambiguity about the natural or supernatural, or real or a dream falls under the category of "fantastic." While encountering such a narrative genre, the text poses hesitation for the reader about how to perceive or explain the supernatural aspect of a text (33). But as soon as the doubt or ambiguity is resolved, the text stops being fantastic and it slips into the category of uncanny or marvelous. If the supernatural elements are given a rational explanation (as a dream state or a product of one's imagination), the genre is called "uncanny" (41). On the other hand there are genres where the supernatural is accepted. Texts like *Arabian Nights* or the science fiction of nineteenth century France are such examples, and they are characterized as "marvelous" (54-56). Todorov theorizes the fantastic as a liminal state, "a frontier" between the uncanny and marvelous, which poses more ambiguity than certitude for the reader (44). But what is the purpose of such ambiguity in narrative? Todorov provides three reasons for it. Of them, the first two are relevant to my argument:

First, the fantastic produces a particular effect on the reader — fear, or horror, or simply curiosity — which the other genres or literary forms cannot provoke. Second, the fantastic serves the narration, maintains

suspense: the presence of fantastic elements permits a particularly dense organization of plot. (92)

As per Todorov, the first function is categorized under pragmatics, and it acknowledges a special epistemological status for the fantastic compared to other literary genres: to be in “hesitation” is to inquire, but this curiosity is provoked in a manner in the fantastic genre that other genres cannot. The second purpose has structural implications. It suggests that the elements of supernatural in a narrative afford complex plot development, which in turn proves conducive to the way suspense operates in narratives.

These two purposes have their origin in a crucial aspect about the fantastic, which is that the hesitation or ambiguity, the primal character of the fantastic, demands resolution. The suspense and the curiosity are, in turn, driven by that demand. The unexplained supernatural in the narrative is posed as an anomaly for the reader, and in the process of reading this ambiguity is resolved as uncanny or marvelous.

But for Todorov, to acknowledge the tension between natural and supernatural is the *modus operandi* of the fantastic in the classical sense. The modern fantastic, however, operates by a different rule. Todorov singles out Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* as the most demonstrative example of the modern fantastic. In the classic fantastic the supernatural was introduced against the backdrop of the reader’s realistic expectations, but in the modern genre, the supernatural is no longer viewed as an anomaly or intrusion. Todorov writes: “*what in the first world [classic fantastic] was an exception here [in modern fantastic] becomes the rule*” (174; emphasis in the original).

The very first line of *The Metamorphosis* begins with the supernatural: “When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed

in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (3). For the rest of the story, Todorov argues, the movement is toward the acceptance of this abnormal—a process of “adaptation” (171). No explanation is given for the cause of Gregor’s metamorphosis, and his human-animal state is increasingly treated as a normal or accepted reality. Modern fantastic then is no longer characterized by hesitation or doubt that demands to be resolved; instead, it operates by normalizing the ambiguous, treating it as the “rule.”

Now, the question is, what happened to the two functions of classical fantastic that Todorov outlined above? The fantastic that used to be contained within the pages of the book now “swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it” (Todorov 174). The effect of curiosity, which was the first function of the old fantastic, can no longer be directed externally. If the classical fantastic text presented the ambiguity to be transient, it now has to be accepted as permanent, and as a way of perceiving and understanding reality.

Such epistemological formulation of modern fantastic is bound to have an impact on the role of suspense, which is the second function of classic fantastic. Todorov, however, does not discuss the new status of suspense. So the critical question to raise here is, if in the classic fantastic the heightened hesitation was a cause factor in suspense, how is suspense generated in *The Metamorphosis* if the hesitation is withdrawn?

Kafka’s aesthetics of modern fantastic can be extended to Márquez’s Magical Realism. Todorov himself draws this parallel in his article “Les Categories.” As in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, the hesitation or the fantastic in the classic sense ceases to exist in Magical Realism. Amaryll Chanady, basing her theorization of Magical Realism

on Todorovian fantastic, writes in *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*:

In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist. (24)

Chanady refers to “fantastic” in the classical sense of the term. The contrast, however, puts Márquez’s narrative style in the same territory as Kafka’s concerning their treatment of the supernatural. Further, by ambiguating the real and unreal, Magical Realism raises similar epistemological concerns. Since in Márquez’s storyworld, the natural laws are frequently flouted and cause and effect are undermined, the genre demands of the readers to adopt a new perception. Wendy B. Faris, in her book *Ordinary Enchantments*, identifies the issue of perception in Magical Realist texts (“through whose eyes” the narrative is presented) as an epistemological concern, which the genre has inherited from modernism (33). So both in Kafka and Márquez’s styles the epistemological preoccupation is distanced from the problem of the classic fantastic (whether this is real or supernatural) and aligned with a perpetually ambiguated way of “seeing” things.

The epistemological concerns of the modern fantastic are quite different from Victorian realism. The latter encouraged a skeptical attitude toward reality but never accepted the reality itself to be liminal or unstable as writers like Márquez and Kafka did. For writers like John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, and Emily Brontë, knowledge was best accepted *through* skepticism, and suspense proved to be an able aesthetical device to

demonstrate that habit. But they never questioned the problematic nature of the knowledge itself. That question was taken up by many twentieth century writers, who practiced the aesthetics of a “normalized” fantastic because their immediate reality was bereft of a rational separation between real and unreal, truth and falsehood. This shift in the epistemological concern raises an obvious question about suspense: since the Victorian realists relied on the aesthetics of suspense to serve a philosophical end, how would the philosophy of modern fantastic have inflected suspense? Alternately, the status of suspense should be a matter of intrigue when probed through the terms of the modern fantastic: if hesitation or doubt provided plot movement and suspense in the earlier fantastic, how would such narrative strategies operate in an atmosphere of “normalized” hesitation? I will attempt to answer these questions in the “Analysis of Suspense” section by probing a particular narrative episode in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Metamorphosis*.

Elements of Suspense

Suspense is popularly conceived of in epistemological terms, as in the question of *what will happen next?*¹ So the source of suspense can be framed in terms of uncertainty:

¹ Suspense, when theorized in psychological terms, is defined as a state of anxiety. Donald Beecher labels the reader’s desire to mitigate the uncertainty of suspense as “the anxiety of ignorance.” He goes on to state anxiety as a “quintessential” and immediate aspect of narrative suspense when the reader is considering “probabilities, survival plans, and alternative futures” for a character’s well-being. “Suspense,” 271. Further, suspense is often confused with mystery. But the two pose quite different epistemological concerns. While suspense is an uncertainty over *what* will happen, mystery ensues from *who* did it? In the first case, the killer’s identity is known to the reader and it is the closing in of the killer toward the protagonist that causes suspense. But in the mystery or whodunit genre, the protagonist or the detective’s search for the killer sustains the reader’s curiosity. Charles Derry, while comparing suspense with mystery, provides this observation: “curiosity [generated by mystery], which is ultimately satisfied, and suspense, which is ultimately relieved.” *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*, 31.

what will happen to the protagonist? Will she get killed or escape the killer? Though the concern over the outcome of a narrative episode is a significant source of suspense, it is not the only source. Other factors like knowledge of a credible and imminent threat, the reader's superior epistemic position vis-à-vis the character, overall epistemic uncertainty, and the manipulation of reader's emotional investment in the character play a contributive role toward suspense. In this section, I will theorize suspense in terms of knowledge (its lack, specificity, or nature).

Four factors that contribute to suspense are as follows:

- Threat of negative outcome
- Dramatic irony
- Epistemic gap
- Invitation to the readers' affective investments and their manipulations

Threat of Negative Outcome

Suspense is highly reliant on the threat of a negative outcome for the character; meaning the character needs to be in danger for suspense to be activated (Derry 42-45; De Wied and Zillmann 256; Tan and Ditlewag 152; Vorderer 235; Zillmann 201). Donald Beecher suggests that film specialists have been preoccupied with maximizing the "spectator anxiety" in case of suspense scenes, and some of the scenarios that he goes on to cite are "shark attacks, car chases, the detected presence of aliens, helpless babysitters in monstrous houses threatened by menacing phone calls" (Beecher 257). Further, the greater the threat's damaging potential, the higher the degree of suspense: Ed Tan and Gijbert Ditlewag argue that "[t]he degree of activation of a suspense inference is

heightened by the relevance of the expected negative event for the protagonist, in other words, the seriousness of the threat” (166).

Why this emphasis on threat?² One explanation can be negativity bias, which proposes that a negative situation impacts an individual more strongly than a positive situation even when the two events are of equal intensity. From the evolutionary standpoint, this makes because, as a survival strategy, “we need to react to negative information, such as potential threats to our safety — faster than to positive information” (Sanderson 161). Or it can be explained in terms of the infrequency of negative occurrences compared to the positive ones in everyday reality, which makes human beings more cautious and attentive toward negative outcomes (Rozin and Royzman 297). Of course, such an argument is not free of the bias that “everyday” refers to a quotidian reality that is not inclusive of people finding themselves in the grips of trauma, even prolonged trauma, in which negative outcomes are expected and assigned to a different psychological space. For the risk of veering this discussion in the direction of the psychological effect of threat, I will suggest that the knowledge of an impending threat is a sufficient factor in causing suspense. In the following sections, it will be of interest to analyze how Márquez and Kafka employed the specter of threat as a narrative strategy.

Dramatic Irony

This concept refers to an epistemological imbalance between the reader and the character. There is certain information made available to the reader that the character

² William Brewer argues that positive and negative outcomes have equal chance at inducing suspense, but he too concedes that “the vast majority of suspense texts involve a potential negative outcome for the character” (115) in *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*.

does not possess yet. So from a more informed position, the reader can experience suspense. To put it another way, dramatic irony refers to a discrepancy in knowledge between characters and readers, and is thus a function of *point of view*. Alfred Hitchcock, the purported master of suspense, clarified what dramatic irony is in the process of contrasting suspense with mystery:

I've never used the whodunit technique, since it is concerned altogether with mystification, which diffuses and unfocuses suspense. It is possible to build up almost unbearable tension in a play or film in which the audience knows who the murderer is all the time, and from the very start they want to scream out to all the other characters in the plot, "Watch out for So-and-So! He's a killer!" (Martin 72)

The "watch out!" effect comes from the reader's superior epistemological position compared to the characters, and its psychological impact is an acute state of anxiety because the reader cannot intervene in the storyworld and save the character. Chatman encapsulates this state as the reader's inability to "communicate that information [of the threat] to the characters, with whom we have come to empathize" (59). Similarly, Tan and Diteweg list the audience's inability "to act" as a distressing position for the reader and a source of great anxiety (152). This lack of agency on the part of the reader is echoed by Smuts: "narratives are extremely effective at creating suspense because, unlike real life, where we can actively work toward the satisfaction of a desire, we are completely powerless over narratives" (285).

As a narrative technique, dramatic irony can be studied as a "strategic distribution of knowledge" in the text (Altes 262). At what juncture of the narrative the information is

revealed, what is the awareness level of the character, and what textual strategies are employed to maintain and heighten the reader's informed state are useful methods to analyze dramatic irony.

Epistemic Gap

I use this term in relation to the uncertainty that looms over the outcome to the threat, and the narrative events it takes to reach that point. Compared to dramatic irony, the epistemic gap focuses on the character's lack of knowledge about his or her surroundings and future; hence, it is a function of *plot*. Whether the character will survive or get killed is posed as a matter of concern by the text. As long as this question is not answered in the narrative, an uncertainty looms in the reader's mind. Moreover, uncertainty exists over *how* the character will escape or triumph. The epistemic gap refers to these questions of what and how. In structural terms, an epistemic gap exists between the initial event, when the risk or danger is introduced in the narrative, and the outcome event, when the risk is fully mitigated or succeeds in negatively affecting the character.

Chatman dismisses the role of the outcome event as a factor in suspense. He claims that "anxiety [that we feel for characters] is not a reflex of uncertainty about the conclusion, since that is already foregone" (59). He instead transfers the cause factor entirely to dramatic irony. Chatman's reference to "uncertainty" deals with only one aspect of the epistemic gap, i.e. the outcome event or the "what" aspect of the character's fate. Even in popular literature, uncertainty is experienced by the reader in spite the fact that the genre expectation assures the hero's safe escape in the end. In such instance, the epistemic gap for the reader stems from *how* the character will escape. In the book

Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction, Meir Sternberg provides a nuanced interrelation between these two epistemic gaps, which he frames as the what and how “hypotheses” (89). In analyzing the arc of suspense in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Sternberg argues that by giving away the outcome that Odysseus will survive even before his ordeal begins, the suspense is not nullified. Instead, it allows the author to shift the reader’s attention to the question of “circumstances of the conflict,” and to foreground Odysseus’s human traits and dense personality (87-88). This distinction between the uncertainty of the “what” and the “how” is more pronouncedly demonstrated in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which, as in the *Odyssey*, the outcome events are often given away early. But through my analysis in the next section, I will argue that Márquez is still able to produce suspense by undermining the “what” hypothesis through his anti-realist aesthetic.

Because of their aesthetics of modern fantastic, Márquez and Kafka’s texts present scope for another layer of epistemic uncertainty. The hesitation or uncertainty that ensues from the real vs. supernatural tension can complicate the epistemic gap posed by suspense. This would increasingly be the case in the particular scenes that I will analyze in *The Metamorphosis* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Invitation to the Readers’ Affective Investments and Their Manipulations

The above three factors implicitly acknowledge an affective register. Since the threat usually concerns a human character, a subjective entity, the role of affect in suspense cannot be denied. Between the reader and the character, an affective correspondence exists. But then, how this affective component germinates and develops in the reader’s mind is not an easily determinable process. In the article “The Paradox of

Suspense,” Noël Carroll singles out the reader’s concern for a moral outcome as the source for emotional involvement (77). Dolf Zillman, in his article “The Psychology of Suspense in Dramatic Exposition,” argues that a character’s likability determines the reader’s investment in the outcome (218). Though there is an element of truth in these theories, they fail to grant suspense to morally ambiguous narratives or stories with anti-hero protagonists. Robin Wood succinctly articulates why identifying the source of reader’s affective investment in a story is an extremely complicated task. Challenging those film theorists who have taken a simplified approach to deduce viewer’s identification with the characters in Hitchcock’s movies, Wood writes:

[I]dentification in the cinema is an extremely complex, multilayered, intricate phenomenon...Identification may not be total or nontransferable; it can flicker sporadically and partially in the play of sympathies, shift from character to character, operate in relation to two different (and perhaps antagonistic) characters at once, be encouraged, qualified, or denied altogether. Most important, it can function on different levels simultaneously, developing tensions and contradictions in a complex dialectic. (310)

So the reader’s affective attitude toward the character is a fluctuating and layered entity. And for this reason, it is reductive to give it a semblance of stability through factors of morality and likability. Further, even though the characters constitute the emotional locus of the narrative, they by no means constitute the sole reason for the reader’s affective response. For example, ancillary conditions like physical setting, cultural milieu, or a particular narrative situation can influence the reader’s empathic response toward the

character. So a reader's affective correspondence with the character constitutes a spectrum and the factors that activate this spectrum are multifarious and not limited to the character's disposition.

For this reason, I have attempted to take a broader approach here in predicting what textual strategies may trigger the reader's affective investment. Since it is nearly impossible to list all the probable textual strategies, I have only picked factors that are relevant to Kafka and Márquez's texts and my current argument. Further, these factors are based on particular narrative strategies that the authors employ.

- Sympathetic Situations: For certain dramatic scenarios, their emotional pull ensues from their widely identifiable tragic connotations. A character finding himself/herself in that situation is designed as a textual strategy to stimulate interest and to propel investment in the outcome. For example, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the prospect of Úrsula, the matriarch, losing a son or the son's moral and spiritual defeat in the war amounts to recognizable tragic circumstances. Similarly, in *The Metamorphosis*, a man being transformed to a vermin overnight, and then, as a sole bread-winner of his family, being subject to lose his job are alarming situations that prompt the reader to affectively identify without having to like or "know" the character.
- Confined to the Character's Consciousness: By employing a first person or a limited third person point of view, the writer can provide access to the character's consciousness. This is also a way of confining the reader to a character's mode of thinking, worldview, emotionality, and awareness of the reality. Wood points out that Hitchcock, often through strategic camerawork, provides the viewer intimate

access to a character's knowledge state and viewpoint (307). Though Wood separates this sort of intimate sharing of consciousness from emotional identification, it is hard to see how this boundary cannot be easily breached. Access to the character's mind if it exposes the reader to a character's negative qualities, also informs the reader of the character's vulnerabilities and limitations, which in turn can trigger the reader's affective response. In *The Metamorphosis*, the reader has access to only Gregor's consciousness to make sense of the story. This intimate relationship with Gregor does not allow for easy emotional distancing on the part of the reader.

- Expression of Affect: A character's vocal or facial expression of pain, anguish, or terror can trigger the reader's emotions reflexively and reflectively. Zillmann goes on to state that such "bodily, facial, paralinguistic, and linguistic expression of emotional experiences by another individual" can trigger empathic response from the reader (215). The point that should be sufficient for my argument here is that such expressional cues in the narrative can act as invitation to the reader's emotional investment. In case of *The Metamorphosis*, this criterion will be useful to explain how Kafka employs various textual strategies to involve the reader's emotions in an ambiguous way.

Analysis of Suspense

One Hundred Years of Solitude

Márquez's novel is a tale of the Buendía family over generations and the town of Macondo (located in the remote Aracataca region of Colombia) they inhabit. As the

Buendías witness, generation after generation, the grip of repetitive misfortune, follies, and dysfunction upon them, Macondo's fate parallels in how it transforms from primitive wilderness ("the world was so recent that many things lacked names") to a bustling industrial town, only to be abandoned as a ghost town later (1). The cyclical motif that pervades the story also extends to the curse of incest that follows the Buendías. The first generation of Buendías—the patriarch José Arcadio Buendía and the matriarch Úrsula Iguarán—are cousins and their marriage is haunted by the curse that their children will be born with a pig's tail. Though the three children Úrsula gives birth to escapes such a fate, the curse strikes the last generation of Buendías. At the final stage of the book, the incest between the aunt and the nephew results in the birth of a son with the cartilaginous tail, and at the same moment, a cyclonic windstorm hits Macondo, annihilating the town and its inhabitants.

The opening line of the book introduces the reader to one of the sons of José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula with the pall of death looming over him: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (1). In a complex interweaving of time, as the anticipation over Aureliano Buendía is left in suspense, Márquez veers the narrative into the distant past of José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula's marriage, their self-imposed exile from their hometown, and the founding of Macondo with their fellow itinerants. As the Buendías try to live a peaceful and harmonious domestic life, Macondo gets embroiled in the acrimonious and bloody national politics. Upon witnessing the injustices and oppression of the government, Aureliano Buendía, who has always been a solitary, sensitive, and perspicacious person, goes through a transformation and decides

to start a war against the government. The insurgency that Aureliano Buendía begins with a band of friends with the declaration “don’t call me Aureliano anymore. Now I’m Colonel Aureliano Buendía” turns him into a fierce and legendary insurgent leader in the country’s civil war (101). He dramatically survives the execution attempt by the firing squad with which the novel opens, only to become a savage and callous tyrant. But after twenty years of waging a futile war Colonel Aureliano Buendía comes to another change of heart. He ultimately recognizes the attrition of his empathetic and ethical character. He decides to end the war and sign a peace treaty. But his personal contentment will elude him, and he will unsuccessfully attempt to end his life.

The narrative episode that I will single out for the analysis of suspense is this failed suicide attempt by Colonel Aureliano Buendía. In the process of my analysis of the events leading up to the suicide attempt, I want to demonstrate how the real and the supernatural overlap and coexist in Márquez’s ambiguated vision of reality. And even though this seamless representation is narrated with “a straight face” (Bell-Villada 42), I argue that the underlying tension between the real and the supernatural plays to the benefit of suspense.

In case of the Colonel’s suicide attempt, Márquez gives away not only the “what” but also the “how” aspect of the outcome event early in the narrative. He informs the reader that Colonel Buendía will survive the suicide attempt and the bullet will come out “through his back without damaging any vital organ,” which is no less a fantastic event (103). This lessening of the epistemic gap will be compensated by dramatic irony and the reader’s affective investment in Úrsula’s sympathetic situation to sustain suspense. It can be said that the schema of suspense for this episode is not uncharacteristic. But where it

deviates from the norm is the way the extrasensory perception and superstition come to dominate the outlook of the episode. In fact, I contend that in this case, with false foreshadowing, the elements of supernatural drive suspense by establishing themselves as a menacing force with potential to challenge the “real,” which is heralded already by the author as the purported outcome to the episode.

Colonel Buendía returns from a brutal and pointless war of twenty years thoroughly spent and disillusioned. The only recourse left for him now is to opt for a truce between his soldiers and the government. Just before the treaty is about to be signed, the Colonel returns to his home in Macondo as a transformed man. For a man, whose legend used to be fierce and uncompromising, his defeated attitude is noted by his mother:

1. Úrsula understood then that they would not have him home for long. “If it’s not the war,” she thought, “it can only be death.” (172)

Úrsula’s premonition with its explicit reference to the negative outcome of death holds the first clue that something bad is about to happen. Also, Úrsula has been clairvoyant about death once before. She was the one who warned her grandson Aureliano José against leaving the house: “Something terrible is going to happen...Don’t go out into the street after six o’clock” (151). But Aureliano José disregarded the warning only to get shot fatally. Further, prior to this point in the text, a strong precedent for premonition has already been set: Colonel Buendía foresees the death of his own father, he is clairvoyant enough to predict his adopted sister Rebeca’s initial arrival at Macondo, and his knack for prediction even extends to mundane events such as the breaking of pots. Similar instances of clairvoyance from other characters have established that in this narrative, world

premonitions come true. Following such precedents, Úrsula's foreboding warns of the proximity of danger, which is further reinforced by the next clue. Noticing his son's aloofness at the dinner table, Úrsula speaks out:

2. "If you have to go away again," she said halfway through dinner, "at least try to remember how we were tonight." (172)

The signal phrase here is "go away," which can be linked to the earlier fear of death.

Also, in the twenty years of being away from her, Úrsula has endured many times the fear of losing her son. On one occasion, when she learns that the Colonel is fighting in the distant regions of the Caribbean, she says: "We've lost him forever ... If he follows this path he'll spend Christmas at the ends of the earth" (145). By this time in the book, Úrsula has established herself as a benevolent, resourceful, and strong-willed matriarch. Yet, her resiliency to keep the family together has been constantly challenged. She has already lost or been separated from many family members by the plague of misfortune and the ravages of the region. Now that she is about to lose another son, the pathos of the mother and her entreaty can act as invitation to the reader's affective investment.

Next, the Colonel gives in to contemplation and is besieged by memories; yet, he finds himself impervious, unable to attach any emotion or feelings to them. That's when he realizes the ravages of the war on him, and he says:

3. "I'm sorry," he excused himself from Úrsula's request. "It's just that the war has done away with everything." (173)

The Colonel's situation is ironically tragic, because his effort to fight for equality and justice for his countrymen has ended in such futility and mockery. The man who armed himself to fight a brutal and autocratic government ultimately realizes years later that he

is left with no ideals and that what he is “fighting for is power” (Márquez 168). In the process of fighting dictators, he himself has turned into one: “prey to the same fanaticism and is ready to sacrifice even his friends to achieve his political objectives” (Higgins 42). So the Colonel is a failed “hero,” and no one realizes it more acutely than he himself, which is indicated by his stubborn reticence, his determination to end the war, and his acknowledgment of the war’s total and damning toll on him. The Colonel’s tragic circumstance is also a sharp reminder of a society suffering irremediable loss and not being at peace with itself. So through the emotional turmoil of Úrsula and the Colonel, and the tragic realities of a war-torn society, the text attempts to deepen the reader’s emotional investment in the outcome of the episode.

Next, it is conveyed that the Colonel is about to get rid of his old memories, especially the poems that he wrote during the war for his dead wife. Here he is instructing his niece-in-law to burn them:

4. “Light it [the stove] with this,” he told her, handing her the first roll of yellowish papers. “It will burn better because they’re very old things.”
(174)

These poems used to be a source of solace for the Colonel during war, and when he gets rid of them, it indicates the extent to which the Colonel has become emotionally impervious. The pressing question becomes: is he really planning to “go away” forever? The first sign of such “resistance to nostalgia” appears earlier in the novel, when he does not allow anyone closer than ten feet of him (156). Then Úrsula remarks that “he looks like a man capable of anything.” Indeed, now that he burns the letters, the path seems to be cleared for a drastic step. To add mystery to the matter, we hear next from Pilar

Ternera, a fortuneteller, who has a knack of being precise with her predictions. When she visits the Colonel, she passes the warning:

5. “Watch out for your mouth,” she told him, and he wondered whether the other time she had told him that during the height of his glory it had not been a surprisingly anticipated vision of his fate. (174)

Between Úrsula’s premonition and Pilar Ternera’s prophecy, a negative outcome for the Colonel is emphatically suggested. These supernatural signs are complemented by the Colonel’s unflinching mood of resignation, which operates in the dimension of the real. But I contend that it is the former (i.e. the supernatural or irrational) which dominates the mood of the episode and signals most threateningly that a drastic fate looms over the Colonel. So far, it has not yet been signaled that this episode is leading to the Colonel’s attempt at suicide. The next clue however attempts to steer the reader toward that conclusion. When the Colonel is in the company of his personal physician, he asks him to locate the position of the heart on his chest, and the doctor—

6. “...listened with his stethoscope and then painted a circle on his chest with a piece of cotton dipped in iodine.” (174-175)

It must be acknowledged here that this clue may not be sufficient enough for some readers to connect the Colonel’s unusual demand to his plan to shoot himself in the chest. So at least two possible interpretive scenarios must be entertained here: 1) the reader may fail to associate the Colonel’s locating of his heart to his failed suicide attempt, which has already been revealed earlier in the narrative; and 2) the reader may succeed in establishing the connection. I will proceed with my argument with the latter interpretation

because the former will continue to follow the same trajectory of suspense (the one that is based on the epistemic gap of “what”).

Once the reader foresees the destination point of the present narrative episode, it can be argued that suspense factors such as dramatic irony and the reader’s affective involvement become the dominant causes of suspense. But there is a twist to this deduction. I contend that the unreal dimension such as premonition and superstition prevails as a counterforce in the course of the narrative. They keep the pressure of negative outcome hanging over the Colonel’s fate even if it has already been foretold that the suicide attempt will end up in a failure. The next narrative event will help to forward this thesis further. The day comes for signing the treaty. The hour of dawn is described as “warm and rainy” when the Colonel appears in the kitchen to have his regular cup of coffee. There Úrsula tells him:

7. “You came into the world on a day like this...Everybody was amazed at your open eyes.” (175)

The sense of coincidence accentuates Úrsula’s premonition. At the symbolic level, the text is highly suggestive that Úrsula’s observations cannot be random. Thus, a doubt is raised: could the meteorological sign be indicative of the Colonel’s exit from the world, while reminding the mother of his entry? The pattern of coincidence proliferates in *One Hundred Years*. It seems to be ingrained in the genealogy of the Buendía family. To cite just one example, the repetition of names in the novel across generations amount to a pattern, where each name comes to identify with particular personality traits. None other than Úrsula herself confirms the pattern: “While the Aurelianos were withdrawn, but with lucid minds, the José Arcadios were impulsive and enterprising, but they were marked

with a tragic sign” (181). John Deveny and Juan Manuel Marcos call such repetitive naming convention as Marquez’s way of connoting “mythic omens” (43). Already, Aureliano José, the Colonel’s namesake son, has met a fatal end with a gunshot wound, which raises doubt about the Colonel’s chances against a formidable pattern of coincidence.

Further, there are other trends in the book to this point, which portend to an unusual or unnatural death for the Colonel. His brother died from a gunshot wound under mysterious circumstances and his nephew was executed by a firing squad. So the odds of a natural lifespan are stacked against the male heirs of the Buendía family. But then again, the Colonel has proved himself to be infallible to the assassination attempts against him. “He survived fourteen attempts on his life, seventy-three ambushes, and a firing squad. He lived through a dose of strychnine in his coffee that was enough to kill a horse” (Márquez 103). The counter interpretation to such a resilient life story is that if anyone is capable of taking the Colonel’s life, then it is only he himself. So between Úrsula’s premonition and an established symbolic pattern in the book, a tentative scenario congeals in the text: what if the Colonel were to die of the suicide attempt? Of course, that will be in violation of the outcome already disclosed by the narrator, but then the ambiguous and surprising world of Magical Realism does not entirely preclude such a scenario.

So in the contestation between the real and the supernatural, two competing scenarios develop in the narrative: first, the desire to believe in the reality of the narrated world, where the Colonel’s survival was announced to be certain; second, the heightening foreboding which signals that the Colonel is not going to be safe. Had the second

scenario not been advanced, the former scenario that operates in the dimension of the real would have begotten suspense through dramatic irony and the reader's affective investment. To elaborate, if the reader believes that the Colonel will remain unscathed, the reader's epistemological advantage over Úrsula will constitute as dramatic irony. Considering the reader's affective investment in Úrsula (because of her sympathetic situation), the reader will desire to relieve her anxiety and communicate to her the reverse of the "watch out!" effect, which is that her son will survive in spite of her foreboding.

But the second scenario developing through an anti-rational medium clouds the predictability of the former scenario. It casts doubt upon the Colonel's survival and establishes the threat of a negative outcome as a plausible source of suspense. And the pall of uncertainties also puts in play the epistemic gap of "what" will happen to the Colonel and "how." Additionally, the text engenders dramatic irony and invites the reader's affective investment differently compared to the first scenario. With the possibility of harm to the Colonel, the emotional stakes are raised in the already sympathetic circumstances of Úrsula and the Colonel. In case of dramatic irony, there is a kind of deconstruction in the sense that the characters hold an upper hand over the characters in epistemological terms. For characters like Úrsula and Pilar Ternera, their supernatural beliefs allow them foresight and advantage that the reader does not possess. So in the contestation between the real and the supernatural, the suspense ensues from cognitive dissonance, having to entertain the possibility of two competing scenarios at the same time.

The narrative episode progresses with the Colonel mulling over his past. He thinks of an alternate outcome to his life had he not started the war. As he is about to leave the house, we get another heartrending entreaty from the mother:

8. “Aureliano,” Úrsula said to him then, “promise me that if you find that it’s a bad hour for you there that you’ll think of your mother.”

Úrsula’s premonition continues and her anguish intensifies equally. Later in the narrative, the attempt to suicide is delayed by intervening details and the process of signing the treaty. Later when the Colonel pulls the trigger on himself, the narrative immediately switches to Úrsula:

9. At that moment in Macondo Úrsula took the cover off the pot of milk on the stove, wondering why it was taking so long to boil, and found it full of worms.
“They’ve killed Aureliano,” she exclaimed.

Úrsula’s conclusion derived from her superstition still keeps the ambivalence active and heightened in the text. The contestation site between the real and supernatural is not relented in favor of one or the other yet. Instead, a climate of doubt is still nourished and entertained down to the final possible moment. Soon, the Colonel is brought home and declared out of danger. With this, it can be concluded that the suspense for this narrative episode has abated. This outcome is in conformance with the expectation set by the earlier prolepsis, thus upholding the reliability of the narrator. But then, the above analysis demonstrates that if the Colonel’s survival of the suicide attempt was construed to be a given outcome then the introduction of premonition, prophecy, and superstition injects skepticism and rethinking to that assumption.

Márquez weaves together a suspenseful narrative episode with an ambivalent or doubtful outcome. His ability to keep multiple possibilities simultaneously open is the direct product of his aesthetics of modern fantastic — to juxtapose the rational and supernatural without acknowledging the tension between them or attempting to resolve it. In fact, he overplays the tension between two competing scenarios (one channeled through the realistic framework and the other through the supernatural) to accentuate suspense. It cannot be said that Márquez tried to mislead the reader through the false foreshadowing of a danger to debunk the supernatural as a false belief system when compared with rationalist epistemology. That will be incongruent with other narrative instances in the book when the supernatural elements have proved themselves to be an infallible way of anticipating the future. Further, Márquez himself was plagued by premonitions and superstitions all along his life. He even went on to say that the extrasensory perception has validity and usefulness that the rationalist thought of the Western World has decided to repudiate (Hart 233). So, the ambiguous nature of a dual scenario establishes supernatural as capable of engendering anxiety and uncertainty that can conflict with the “real” and that can challenge the certitude even when the source of it is an omniscient narrator. By coming close to undermining a given or pre-established outcome, the ambiguated aesthetics of Márquez raise doubt about the nature of knowledge: what is real and what is unreal? Can anything be accepted as certain? Thus, the ambivalent suspense becomes an epistemological exercise, to an intense and unsettling degree.

Finally, Márquez’s deployment of suspense is worth considering in terms of the ways he conforms to and departs from the norms of suspense. On one hand, by giving

away the outcome event, he takes away the epistemic uncertainty of “what.” That in itself is not without precedent. But then he eliminates to a degree the “how” factor of suspense by revealing that the bullet exits the Colonel’s body miraculously without harming his vital organs. He then uncharacteristically ambiguates a traditional arc of suspense by exploiting the supernatural fears and going to the extent of destabilizing the reader’s pre-established assumption. But even though the Colonel escapes unharmed and the fear of negative outcome abates, it only begets another form of irony, another line of departure from the norms of suspense. After surviving the suicide attempt, the Colonel is rendered more impotent, pathetic, and tragic. He lives as a ghost of himself, a reduced and alienated apparition, a person whose glorious past is only an embarrassing reminder; he’s humiliated and ignored and treated as token at times, thus forcing the question: was it worth it for him to have survived? Wasn’t death a more dignified exit for him? In the conventional suspense, a character’s assured safety and permanent elimination of threat is considered a desired outcome. But here, the Colonel’s survival turns out to be tragicomedy. The pressing question becomes: “Is he ever going to die?” That is a remarkable turnaround compared to the opening line of the book, where the survival of this character is posed as an earnest question. Thus, Márquez’s departure point from the norms of suspense epitomize his aesthetics of modern fantastic, where stereotypical or preconceived notions are disallowed or turned on their heads to pose a larger philosophical question about truth, reality, and knowledge.

The Metamorphosis

Kafka's novella narrates the story of a Jewish family living in Prague. Gregor Samsa, the young, unmarried son and the breadwinner of the family works as a travelling salesman, and turns into a vermin overnight. The plot is primarily about how Gregor and his family react to this absurd misfortune. Gregor, an obedient and caring family member, who takes pride in providing for his family, suddenly finds himself dependent upon his family's generosity and favor. His younger sister becomes his primary caregiver, but she increasingly becomes peremptory, callous, and finally, hostile in her attitude. Gregor's father assumes an uncompromising stance and believes in dealing out stern treatment to Gregor. In fact, he does not hesitate to inflict grievous injury to Gregor's verminous body. Gregor's mother remains a benign a figure, but her empathy toward Gregor is equivocated by her obligation for her husband and the intimidating appearance of the vermin. Mistreated by his family, Gregor shows a growing attitude of resignation and acceptance of his misfortune. But from the very beginning of the text—the moment Gregor finds himself transformed into a vermin—his manner of acceptance of his animalized state and misfortune provide a fertile territory for drama and enigma.

To reiterate the opening line of the story: "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin" (3). There is a puzzle posed here: is this "real" or a dream? Gregor too contemplates his situation and suffers momentary hesitation: "'What happened to me?' he thought. It was no dream." But then Gregor's gradual rationalization of his situation, his lack of hesitation, and most importantly, "the absence of surprise" in his manner become the most astonishing quality of the text (Todorov 169). This quality for Todorov

drives the generic shift from classical fantastic to the modern one; in other words, the movement from hesitation to adaptation (171). Meaning, Gregor's unusual situation is growingly presented as a plausible scenario.

But in this movement from hesitation to adaptation, or implausibility to acceptance, I want to pinpoint a precise narrative moment in *The Metamorphosis* when a definitive turn occurs toward *adaptation* for Gregor as well as the reader. This moment pertains to Gregor revealing himself before his parents and his boss for the first time after his transformation. Since the story is narrated from the limited third person subjective point of view, the reader only has recourse to Gregor's consciousness. Hence, from the beginning, there remains an element of doubt that the entire situation might be a product of Gregor's hallucination. Gregor himself expresses the need "to have his metamorphosis confirmed by the judgment of his family" (Corngold, "Kafka's" 101). He anticipates the reaction of his parents and boss with dual possibility in mind: "If they were shocked, then Gregor had no further responsibility and he could be calm. But if they took everything calmly, then he, too, had no reason to get excited" (Kafka 10). Gregor's revelation then holds the key to settling a very crucial question in the narrative: has Gregor truly metamorphosed or is he dreaming or is there any other rational explanation for his implausible state? But when Gregor's appearance shocks the other characters, elicits unequivocal expression of alarm and revulsion from them, and leads his father to injure him callously, I argue that the hesitation over Gregor's metamorphosis is decisively resolved, or that any scope of classical fantastic is fully eliminated. It becomes obvious that in the context of the narrative world, his animalized state is "real," and it has to be accepted without any scope of rational reasoning.

Further, there is evidence to suggest that the moment of Gregor's first appearance was important to Kafka too. As the cover page illustration for the book, Kafka recommended the image of "the parents and the head clerk in front of the locked door" as one possible option (Binder 185). To choose this image, imbued with a sense of suspense, suggests a specific sense of invitation to the reader. Once upon finding his friend in possession of a commercial detective novel, Kafka remarked:

There is no need to be ashamed of reading such things. Dostoievski's *Crime and Punishment* is after all only a crime novel. And Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? It is a detective story. At the heart of the action is a mystery, which is gradually brought to light. But is there a greater mystery than the truth? Poetry is always an expedition in search of truth. (as cited in Beck, 112)

To reveal, to gradually bring to light, is for Kafka, a story's primary preoccupation. So the waiting figures of the parents and the boss set the stage for the "truth" to appear, and for Gregor's metamorphosis to be confirmed. But in the Kafkaesque epistemology, the truth itself is the mystery. In Gregor is concentrated the greatest ambiguity: a human consciousness trapped in an inexplicably verminous body. No explanation is given for how he transformed or why. So Gregor *himself* is the most articulate example of the unresolved ambiguity of the modern fantastic. As my arguments will show later, while Gregor's revealment or the confirmation of his metamorphosis answers one set of questions (mostly of the classical fantastic), it then gives rise to another (of the modern fantastic). Thus, Kafka's notion of "truth" coincides with the modern fantastic.

As was the case in Márquez, suspense can be employed as an analytical tool to study Kafka's aesthetics. In the opening section of *The Metamorphosis*, the movement from hesitation to adaptation may suggest a lack of suspense. On the contrary, this very movement opens up departure points for our conventional understanding of suspense. Through the elements of suspense, such as threat of negative outcome, dramatic irony, epistemic gap, and invitation to the readers' affective investments, it can be shown how Kafka pushed narrative suspense to an unconventional territory rather than negating it.

As one of the causative factors, the threat of a negative outcome is crucial to generating suspense and its presence needs to be anticipatory starting with an initiating event. But *The Metamorphosis* begins with the negative outcome having already struck. The misfortune is no longer an imminent future consequence, which the protagonist must fight off by all means. Instead, the protagonist is put to dealing with the fallout. This alteration in the traditional arc of suspense presents a departure point for Kafka. But then this does not mean that *The Metamorphosis* is anti-suspense. Kafka compensates the lack of anticipatory and imminent presence of a negative outcome through the factor of the epistemic gap.

In the opening section of the story, the certainty of the negative outcome remains in a state of limbo because of the hesitation over the nature of the narrative (real or unreal?). Anxiety in this stage is derived because of the movement toward the conformity over Gregor's misfortune. The gradual withdrawal of the possibility that this might be a dream helps to heighten the conformity of the negative outcome or bridge the epistemic gap. For this reason, the gaze of Gregor's observers becomes crucial in this confirmation process. It amounts to a decisive acknowledgment, which withdraws entirely the

possibility of Gregor's situation being otherwise. So in this case, the danger of negative outcome rather than being operative at the plot level moves to the psychological and epistemological level: meaning, the issue at stake here is not "will the threat strike?" but "has it *actually*?" The suspense then derives from the tension over real vs. unreal epistemological ambivalence, or what Todorov terms as the anxiety of hesitation.

Further, by framing Gregor's situation as per the conventional understanding of the epistemic gap, few interesting conclusions can be drawn. Earlier, I have argued that the epistemic gap typically operates through "what" and/or "how" hypotheses in relation to the negative outcome: "what" will be the protagonist's final fate and "how" will it come to be? To map these questions to the negative event of Gregor's metamorphosis, the "how" criteria is never met. The reader is neither a witness to the process of Gregor's transformation nor is there any reason attributed to it. On the other hand, the "what" conclusion is the opening statement of the story, and only the verification of its certainty is postponed to a later moment. But then the question of "what" also extends to a literal level. The acceptance of Gregor's metamorphosis also evokes the question of Gregor's material condition: *what* is he? The scant details about Gregor's hybridized state do not present a sufficient response. In fact, the physiognomic details of the vermin pose conflicting or contradictory anatomy, which led Stanley Corngold to conclude in his influential essay "Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: Metamorphosis of the Metaphor" that Kafka meant the creature to be ambiguous, "an indecipherable sign" ("Kafka's" 89). On his part, Kafka is known to have objected to the depiction of the creature. When his publisher proposed such an idea, Kafka protested: "Not that, please not that!...The insect cannot be depicted. It cannot be even shown from a distance" (Binder 185).

So the irony here is that the confirmation of Gregor's metamorphosis by the gaze of his family members and boss signals the end of one ambiguity and the start of another. In other words, the epistemic gap of the classical fantastic gives in to that of the modern fantastic. If the ambiguity over Gregor's physicality is never cleared, then the question of "what" happened to Gregor is not fully answered either. The resolution of suspense is then postponed forever.

Another layer of the epistemic gap that is posed in the initial section of *The Metamorphosis* is the possibility that Gregor's situation is perhaps temporary or reversible. He himself entertains such a possibility, when he thinks of how, in the past, any sign of physical pain or abnormality proved to be a temporary ailment and in light of "he was eager to see how today's fantasy would gradually fade away" (Kafka 6). Such sentiment is echoed as wishful thinking when Gregor hopes for the "return of things to the way they really and naturally were" (7). In his direct plea to the manager, the possibility of "recovery" is insinuated too: "when the *obstacle* has been removed, he's bound to work all the harder and more efficiently" (13, my emphasis). So any hope for the reversal in Gregor's metamorphosis can be a source of suspense too.

Kafka's unconventionality extends from the factors of negative outcome and the epistemic gap to dramatic irony. As I have mentioned earlier, *The Metamorphosis* is narrated with a limited third person point of view, except at the denouement when the omniscient viewpoint takes over after Gregor's death. So in the opening section, the reader is limited to Gregor's consciousness and shares his internal thoughts. This, Walter H. Sokel argues in his book *The Myth of Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka*, is one of Kafka's typical narrative ploys, where the reader "stays imprisoned in the solitary

confinement of a limited and subjective consciousness that can only infer, but can never know, the external world” (40). The scope for dramatic irony then diminishes since the reader has little room to gain knowledge advantage over Gregor. But then this argument can be extended to any narrative framed by a limited subjective perspective from a narrator or a character’s standpoint unless there is scope for unreliability. In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka teases the reader’s capacity to disbelieve Gregor, to search for clues to his unreliability. The highly absurd situation in which Gregor finds himself raises the possibility that he is mistaken. But then the “absence of surprise” on Gregor’s part feeds the suspicion that he is perhaps privy to certain knowledge that can explain the cause of his metamorphosis. This then becomes another case of deconstructed dramatic irony, similar to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the reader finds himself/herself at an epistemic disadvantage compared to the characters. Moreover, the narrative world of *The Metamorphosis* preserves many attributes of a rationalistic world, affording the reader a sense of familiarity but at the same time any certitude of knowledge emerging from the reader’s complacency is challenged by Gregor’s irrational and unfamiliar situation.

Finally, Kafka complicates the reader’s emotional involvement in multiple ways. On one hand, Gregor is in a sympathetic situation because of his metamorphosis and the fact that he will lose his job unless he is able to explain his situation to his manager, which he cannot do now because he has lost human speech. But on the other hand, at the center of this sympathetic situation is a monster, a freak, who is physically horror incarnate. Anatomical details about the creature like “the bottom of his little legs exuded a little sticky substance,” having “no real teeth,” and “a brown fluid came out of his

mouth” paint a repulsive figure for the reader (11). So the unconventionality, in this case, is that the reader is asked to affectively engage with a physically repulsive character struggling through a wholly sympathetic situation.

Similar irony extends to the sharing of Gregor’s consciousness. The story’s subjective point of view does not allow emotional distancing from Gregor, whose peculiar situation evokes both pity and alarm. On one hand, the reader is confined to Gregor’s consciousness which mirrors Gregor’s own physical and spiritual entrapment. This, on the other hand, pushes the reader to engage with the repulsive aspects of Gregor’s physicality. Even though Gregor is a human mind inside an animal body, this binary is increasingly undermined in the course of Gregor’s gradual acceptance of his body. So through Gregor’s consciousness, the reader is pushed to accept the animality or monstrosity that the reader could have emotionally distanced from otherwise.

When Gregor finally appears before his parents and boss, he elicits dramatic response from his observers. The manager “burst out with ... hand pressed over his mouth ... slowly backing away”; mother “stood with her hair still unbraided ... looked at his father ... took two steps ... sank down in the midst of her skirts spreading out around her”; father “clenched his fist ... looked around ... shielded his eyes ... sobbed” (12). Gregor’s metamorphosis is confirmed, and he is meted out an injurious treatment by his father, which he does not foresee in his calculation of his observers’ possible reactions. But there is a twist to the above characters’ expressiveness as far as the reader’s affective engagement is concerned. In the typical horror genre, the reader’s affective involvement will be directed toward characters expressing such alarm and anguish at the sight of a horrifying object. But in *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor, the horror itself, is the primary

subject of the reader's emotional attention, and the expression of horror directed at him articulates that he is doomed. Thus, Kafka problematizes the reader's affective investment in the narrative in multiple ways that constitute as the departure from the norm of suspense.

Conclusion

From the above analysis of scenes from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Metamorphosis*, it can be claimed that the two authors' ambiguated vision of the reality and their aesthetics of the modern fantastic introduce sufficient unconventionality into their narratives. Todorov, in his theorization of the modern fantastic, did not fully articulate the role and scope of suspense in the new schema. But from the above analysis, a strong case can be made that *adaptation* or acceptance of ambiguity arising out of the real vs. the unreal tension does not negate suspense. Rather, suspense finds an unconventional but fertile role within the mode of modern fantastic. Márquez quite skillfully exhibits that a presumed trajectory of suspense can be cast into doubt in the light of cognitive dissonance, when realistic and supernatural outcomes have to be entertained at the same time. Even the privileged and indubitable position of an omniscient narrator can be challenged in the process. Also, the mode of dramatic irony leans out of the reader's favor as the characters' heightened perceptual abilities not only hand them an epistemic advantage, but they also, at times, conflict with the reader's assumptions. Finally, the Colonel's survival of the suicide attempt does not allow for a neat resolution of the reader's affective investment in his situation. His humiliation and marginalization, which come out of his prolonged life, challenge the reader's

preconceived notion about the threat of a negative outcome. Wouldn't it have been better for the threat or Úrsula's premonitions to have come true?

In Kafka's aesthetics, once again, the ambiguated nature of the modern fantastic results in many unconventional approaches to suspense. The threat of the negative outcome moves from the plot level to an epistemological and psychological level. The epistemic gaps of "what" happened to Gregor and "how" are either never answered, and even if answered would only beget more doubt and enigma. As far as the dramatic irony is concerned, Gregor seems to have epistemic advantage over the reader, which becomes another source of anxiety and suspense. Also, the reader's affective investment is complicated by withdrawing the possibility of easy distancing from Gregor's animality.

The above examples of unconventionality make a compelling case that the scope of suspense is not limited to a simplistic narrative function that Barthes and Forster made it out to be. Instead, when broken down to an elemental level, suspense can prove to be a rich aesthetic device to study the aesthetics of writers. In the cases of Márquez and Kafka, suspense helps concretize the notion of the modern fantastic at the narrative level. The implication of unresolved suspense or the process of *adaptation* could be studied from a narrative standpoint. In other words, suspense helps to provide a microscopic vision of how the two authors conformed to and departed from the norm to develop their own narrative styles.

I aim to incorporate an ambiguated and unconventional approach to suspense in my own aesthetics. The creative section of my dissertation, which follows next, narrates a reality where the nature of truth and knowledge can be painfully indeterminate. To be in doubt, to be in suspense becomes a way of being. In such a case, suspense cannot neatly

resolve. As an aesthetic device, it must adhere to conventions and depart from them in its own ways in accordance with the narrated reality.

CHAPTER II

EPILOGUE

31st Oct 1999

Hello, this is God Brahma. I'm here to report about the recent cyclonic activities in the Bay of Bengal, and the devastation it's causing in the coastal region of Orissa. The news outlets have gone belly up. So I'll be doing the daily briefings in the interim. The last of the storm has not fully left the region; the wind still howls; the sky is yet to open up; the flood has devoured the coastal land. I will try to be objective and factual in my reporting. Keeping numbers and data is Chitragupta's job. The death toll of the last few hours has completely overwhelmed him. He rolls at the rate of babu time. Without an afternoon siesta his day goes tickety-phoos. So you could imagine his state of mood as he is hopping from village to village, nonstop, tallying the death count as I speak. The number is still mounting every passing minute. Not particularly consoling, I agree, but as I said I have to be objective here. That's something, we as a religious institution take a lot of pride in. So to answer your pressing question about the death toll, I don't have the exact number yet. I do, but I'm waiting for further confirmation before I can release it. The problem is we had to fall back on primitive communication strategies because all the telephone towers are down, hit by the lashing wind in the last 36 hours. You may not believe but according to some estimates the wind speed reached up to 300 km/hour. That's quite scary and something that you could never be prepared for. I'm not trying to

make excuses, but the number says it all. We're not deterred though by the lack of telephone lines. We're hard at work and we've resorted to more ingenious and age old tricks to establish communication with Chitragupta on the ground. Some of you might scoff at us for not having a satellite phone in this day and age. We do actually, but just one and it's with me. Quite an expensive gimmick that thing is and recent budget cuts have compelled us to prioritize our priorities. But as I said, we Hindu Gods are quite professional and well-deployed. Many have not even visited their families and are constantly monitoring the cyclone as if their own backs are getting wet. So please be patient. We'll stay on top of things. And we'll get to the bottom of whoever is...no, scratch that. That's for a different kind of brief I am told. Hold on, wait, hello...I am receiving some updates. Local newspaper offices are completely flooded and the first print edition can only be out on November 5. Shoot! I'm no briefing expert you know. I've friends and families. I've my own life. Where are the other Gods when you need them? Just because I am the supreme one doesn't mean I have to take all the responsibilities. It's not like I get any extra perks or recognition...Now what? Oh kites, more bad news! Chitragupta accidentally counted a few cattle bodies as humans. So he's recounting. It's murky and foamy out there. Total poor visibility you know, and with the number of cattle that have died I am told, plus their bodies all swelling, rotting, salting, and blackening alongside human bodies, it's hard not to get confused. For us, animal or human, the same thing. Life is life after all. But I guess for you people that's not acceptable. So we would respect your sentiments like professionals. This is just in by the way: the tidal surge is recorded to be 25 feet high, a conservative estimate at this point; the amount of rainfall is 900 mm and the number of villages affected are 18,000. As you

could see the numbers are unprecedented, and by mentioning them I am not trying to shirk our responsibility but to underscore the monumental nature of the task in our hand. Now, some of you have already expressed resentment over why there was no early warning system and why adequate protection was not provided. I can absolutely confirm that in the hours preceding the cyclone's landfall we did notice a spike in prayers compared to the usual average, which drew attention of our monitoring personnel and a distress signal was issued immediately. And that led to marathon meeting sessions between the top Gods to streamline and expedite our response strategy. Now, besides the complacency of the aggravated population, who did not resort to basic precautional measures and left their wellbeing solely upon us, underestimating the ferocity of the cyclone, we did our best. We kept burning the midnight oil. Sorry, I realize that's a touch insensitive considering many of you have no access to candle and kerosene, and may spend days or months in darkness. But, it really gets to me when many of you quite inconsiderately pass judgment, "Oh, how we humans suffer? Only if Gods knew!" Well, I've news for you. We Gods have dear and loved ones too. We understand the pain of losing one of them. And most egregious is the speculation in some quarters that the cyclone is God's doing and that we've unleashed it as a punitive measure to make you more subservient. Now, that's quite an accusation. I want to emphasize that mass death is something we always try to avoid, and that's why we don't have a Disaster Management Department. It puts our staffs and resources under extraordinary duress. In fact, it completely crashes our processing protocols and derails our compliance standards. Further, natural calamities are not in our control. Let's not kid ourselves that because Indra is the head of the rain and thunderstorm department, the cyclones do his bidding. I

understand that you people have chosen us as your Gods, entrusted your faith with us, and you expect us to act as superheroes. But let's be practical: forces of universe are not in anyone's control. Nevertheless, we're professionals here. We will leave no stone unturned to bring back normalcy to the region and restore people's faith in us. In fact, as the first task of action, what we have done is to designate the cyclone as "super cyclone." Just to underscore how incomparable the current state of affairs is. Also, this may come as consolation to you that Chitragupta is counting Muslim and Christian bodies too. This is not a moment to be petty. So we're setting aside our differences considering the gravity of the matter and coordinating closely with the Spokesgods of other religions to apprise them of our counting effort. This is a rare example of somberness and solidarity. Hold on! We've some update. Breaking news here...Holy Jupiter! Is that number right? You sure he didn't count dogs and birds? Aw, big bananas! This is a total PR nightmare. Where are the other Gods when you need them, fronting me as the bali ka bakra? Okay, relax now, take long and deep breaths...My apologies, I didn't mean to lose composure like that. We're professionals here. The latest death tally I'm afraid is 5,591. Now, listen to me, before you go out having a faith crisis, getting high off of some existential chlam. Just consider these mere facts our analysts have put together. The storm apparently stalled over inland for 24-hours (one full day, mind you!). Whereas a usual storm would have kept moving, weakening considerably and thus proving less lethal, this one kept unleashing havoc at the same location. How is that for an anomaly? Further, the latest estimate is that the sea surge has traveled 20-30km inland; thus, surprising a whole band of population who never would have imagined a tidal attack. Once again, I am not throwing these numbers to dodge our responsibility. All I am saying is that the extremity

of the situation must be taken into account before any hasty judgment is passed against us. Hold on! Stop the recording! Air is leaking from my lotus. Let me pump it first...Bloody you tape and caulk this thing, but it still keeps leaking. As I was saying victims' prayers arrived to us bit too late, and when they did, the sheer traffic of it crashed our processing channels. But we deployed our emergency and highly capable resources wherever needed to abate the...what now? I dismiss it outright. That's preposterous of you to suggest that we gave preferential treatment to the rich and the elite. If casualties of the poor are disproportionately high, it's not because our staffs are vulnerable to favoritism or that the poor's plea carries inferior currency. Nature does not discriminate. The poor and the rich are same in its eyes, and that of ours too...my, my, I'm starting to hate these alerts. My fellow believers the toll is now 6,959. Now, before you dispatch off your bundle of faith, God and prayer to some samadhi, I urge you to imagine a scenario where land and sea are united, hutments have disappeared, and temples are uprooted. A girl on the treetop after losing 19 members of her family before her eyes is still clinging to life. An old woman let herself be swept away so that her grandson could live. A man lost his life in a bid to save his neighbor's family. Out of what these people's acts of resilience and courage are born if not faith? So we'll do everything in our power to not let down the survivors. In fact, I'll personally oversee a top level committee of executive Gods to identify the inadequacies in our response network...7,547! Blast that man! When was the last time he delivered any good news? Pull him out of there and scrap this daily briefing...Dearly faithfuls, our counting will come to a close with this briefing. The final number will be ascertained and relayed...here now, listen, stop this narabaazi and murdabad business...let's agree not to politicize the

number or attribute speculative designs to the counting. Out of respect for those who left a mark behind in this tragedy, let's not dwell on the negatives, omissions or lacks. Future is what we need to look forward to, the uphill task that the survivors face to be able to live again. Can we then let these unfortunates be burdened further by invoking the specter of the past which they themselves are badly trying to forsake? I am asking you why what we've lost should eclipse what we're left with?

CHAPTER III
THE CLOWN RISES ON THE WEST

3rd Jul, 1999

The daylight has just dipped and Mother yells that Kuna has locked himself in the servant's bathroom, and I am struck by a colorful revelation: a circus, a demonic woman as its ringleader, assisted by her sycophant confidant, an effete owner, a handyman, and finally the clown. The spectacle on offering is wildly entertaining, nothing like the man has ever seen before. And ladies and gentleman, presenting you the prime act of the evening, give it a wild roll of applause, here he is, the jewel, the glorious malfunctional, the one and only, the clown! You confine him to a corner he manages to escape. You take your eyes off him and he's off with pranks. He revels. He laughs. He yodels. The circus crew stands helpless, unable to tame the clown, whereas the audience is enchanted. If this isn't the best circus, they say. Did you see the clown's new trick, they say. Did you? Wonderful! Majestic! Ha ha! Look at the crew. Look at them! Standing there like buffoons, watching the fool make a fool of them.

I am convinced that some are born retard, and some turn into one willfully. Kuna is our willful retard, our deranged clown, providing non-stop entertainment for his own amusement, whereas I bear the audience's applause silently. I want the applause to stop. I want the audience to leave. But the circus is for free and the entertainment here is doled out as charitably as the food relief to flood-affected masses. Forget about the audience

leaving; rather the clown must be stopped. That loony smirk on his face must be ripped off like a mask, and I want to see him gagged and floated off to Andaman. But then that would be precisely what Mother and her sycophant son want, one less obstacle in their nefarious scheme.

Suddenly, Sulekha, the maid, cries out that the paniki in the kitchen is missing, which allows the hysteria to ratchet up. “Cheeku! Oye, Cheeku!” Mother wails out. “Your brother has the paniki in his hand. Somebody smash down the bathroom door, please. Aye, somebody call Anadi. Cheeku, where are you?”

I have no inclination to go in yet. I lay supine upon the cool earth by the water tank, where they can’t see me. And it’s not my usual resting place either. So the cacophony will shoot up as high as the coconut groves around me, whose cool streaks of shadow mottle the earth. In this coastal land, the coconuts carry in them the salinity of the sea, the fronds the sea breeze, and the bark of the trees the pock marks of the sand. So here, the land and the sea truly unite. A man the other day was found dead at the top of a coconut tree, his body tied to the trunk by his gamchha and his arms wrapped around the trunk’s girth in a tight embrace. They brought him down and tried to resuscitate him, only to find the sea water in his lungs.

Kuna won’t die. Believe me he won’t, even if he has the paniki with him (which is questionable to begin with). His profound dilemma will be whether to bring the wrist to the cutter or its blade toward him. That’s the sort of dung-headedness I’m talking of here. And can you believe that once this bungler was the hot hope of the family, the “bright talent” who was sent to America in pomp and pride to earn higher degree in engineering? And yes, he engineered, not in machines and marvels but in steamy kamasutra with this

gori, who sealed his ruin and downfall. A pestilence of obsession got into his head and it feasted upon his sanity, day and night, so tirelessly that he got booted from the school and landed back here flat-faced, spread-eagled, full tom-and-jerry style.

I hear Sulekha climb the guava tree by the bathroom, her relays with Mother, and her labored aahlos and maahlos. She plans to get to the roof so that she can peer through the skylight. When the house was renovated as per vastu shastra with Mother's insidious wealth, she was particular about having an out-of-the-way toilet-plus-bathroom, physically separate from the main house, where lowlies would conduct their private business. Kuna though pops in and out of it to the consternation of Sulekha and without Mother's knowledge. This time he must have locked himself long enough for the show to get prime time treatment.

Father must have joined the show already. I don't hear his voice but I pick up his silent presence which riles up Mother wretchedly, like a saw's pitch changing its tune sensing the end of wood. Father would be calm, trying to appeal to Kuna's reason. He would be wrapping softly against the metal door of the bathroom, and cooing as if he were talking to a toddler: "Kuna? Aye Kuna? Sulekha needs the paniki or we'll get late for the dinner."

Sulekha hollers that she can't see a thing through the skylight. Even if the bathroom light were left on by Kuna, it wouldn't work since the power is out. Already we're a month into the monsoon, but the annual power crisis is yet to be resolved. And because MLA Khalnaik is staging a rally in the town today, the last bit of electricity is devoted to his service. Let the ordinary population wilt and fry, but the election rally

must go unhindered. As Father says, “Our democracy is blind in one eye and that impaired eye is us, the ordinary citizens.”

Mother urges an orderly to hand a flashlight to Sulekha. I’ve a feeling that she is going to scream. Not because she would find Kuna naked; no, the entire house has seen that already. That would not horrify her; rather, she would wildly interpret what she sees. Her mufsali brand of intelligence is vulnerable to antics and exaggerations. Sulekha was always the perfect match to Mother’s hysterical and domineering personality. No wonder she has outlasted all the past maids in this house. Moreover, she is a childless widow, past 40 by now, and no family members to lay claim on her. So when she came to our house from her small village with her sad story, the widow’s potli, and the reference of one of Mother’s devotees, Mother saw an investment opportunity in her. She declared herself as Sulekha’s protector, her own blood, and her mother, a joke since the two are hardly five or six years apart. The announcement of surrogacy buried any uncomfortable question about Sulekha’s caste. Overnight she became a brahmin, and thus any challenge to Mother’s puritanical legacy was conveniently removed.

There, Sulekha screams. Mother says she’s about to faint. “Kuna has done the worst,” she wails. I can imagine Father, still standing by the door, not changing his posture a bit, and trying to drill his voice through the metal door: “Don’t listen to your Mother, Kuna! Open the door and hand the paniki back to the maid.”

Sulekha broadcasts from the rooftop: “He’s lying atop the paniki. His body is not moving.”

“Aye, son!” Mother cries out. “He’s plunged the thing into his belly. He’s bleeding to death now. Somebody bust open the door. Cheeku? Aye Cheeku? Where are you?”

Three things rush to my head at the same time. First, I wonder about the narrow angle of the flashlight entering through the bathroom’s skylight that is unlikely to hit the floor. Plus, add to that the wooly dust and cobweb cluttering the vents of the skylight. And Sulekha thinks she’s got her details right? Second, what is Mantu, that sycophant, up to? Conveniently away from the scene, eh? Pampering himself in his office I suppose, tallying the temple accounts, counting the coins of the hundi, or scheming new ways to boost Mother’s finances. I never hear Mother calling his name for help. Why would she? He’s the jewel of her eyes, the dutiful son, Dharmaraj Yudhistir, and the master plotter. Third, I think of the wooliness and the confusion thickening in my own head.

Ever since I eavesdropped on Mother and MLA Khalnaik’s closed door meeting, my mind has been as restless as high tide. Something criminal and dangerous is afoot at the ice factory. MLA’s stake in it is all too clear: from MLA to MP, that’s the arc of his ambition. Now that the national election is announced and he has managed to convince his party bosses to give him the ticket to contest, he’s more dependent on Mother. His political rise directly comes out of Mother’s tantric appeasement to the goddess, he says. But then their ambition is not limited to the MLA winning the election. It’s a about the ice factory and its owner and the prasad. “Sherbet will come from one end and prasad from the other.” Those words of MLA Khalnaik still echo in my head. Why prasad? It’s a code word for what?

Father reacted predictably when I told him about the conspiracy. He downplayed my alarm as he perused over his daily quota of newspapers: “Cheeku, you’ve a proclivity for sensationalism. This is what happens when you watch excessive TV and movies. Your mother is a deceptive person for sure, but she’s far from being a criminal. She’s as much scared of the prison as any ordinary person out there. You’ve misheard things and in your bias you’ve ended up incriminating your own Mother.” With that our conversation ended and he would not even entertain the idea that Prasad may have a double meaning.

I’ve been to the ice factory. Walked and biked past it twice: one time late at night and another time in daylight. Each time the factory was well-guarded; men with tall lathis and in jungle green uniform. It’s enclosed on all four sides by a concrete boundary wall with a four-lined barbed wire fence running above. The iron gate opens and closes only at the command of the guards to let the trucks or fishermen enter and depart. In comparison, the old state-run ice factory, which has been defunct now, never even had a proper door to the building. So you have to wonder what sort of precious ice is getting made at this new factory? Moreover, at one corner of the factory’s wall is a small tin shack with a back trap door that opens into the compound of the factory. From this shack, which flaunts Mother’s name and face on its billboard, is sold consecrated sherbet which the MLA was talking about. Even in rain people stand in queue to buy the drink that promises to heal ailments, win disputes, ward off evil spells, bring financial success, resolve domestic troubles, and score high marks on exams. This is where the hypocrisy runs deep, as dense as tar. For a woman whose reputation soars in the eyes of her

devotees as high as stars, why is not a single question raised about her inability to cure her own lunatic son?

For some time there have been talks to send Kuna to a loonie asylum. Initially, it was Mother who adamantly opposed the idea. No son of hers was going to be subjected to the examination of masked faces and gown-wearing folks. She would not let the outsiders and her devotees point a finger at her that Ma Devaki Devi's son is in a hospital. No amount of reasoning from Father could dissuade her. But the day Kuna barged into her sacred chamber with two dried coconut strapped to his chest and himself ready to enact the night of sex with the gori, she was suddenly slapped back to sense. Her stubbornness received a cyclonic blow. Only then did she arrive at the conclusion to send him off to an asylum, but only to an out-of-state one so that the secrecy about Kuna's whereabouts can be well guarded; a treachery that Father strongly opposed. He is against shipping Kuna off to the care of some distant asylum, where he could not visit him regularly to monitor the treatment. When the argument between Mother and Father would turn intense, Father would ask in his acerbic skepticism, taking his glasses off and curling his fingers around its frame: "And what would be your excuse when people would ask about his whereabouts?"

"He's at his Aunt's house," Mother would reply. "After all, it's no secret that my sister lives in Dhanbad. So that's what you will say. That's what everyone in this house will say."

"What if he does not get discharged from the hospital for years? We'll keep parroting the same excuse?"

"Why are you such an inconvenience?"

“And I guess you won’t even tell your own sister that her name is involved in the lie?”

“She’s *my* sister. I know how to handle her.”

“And nobody will suspect a thing you’re sure?”

“What are you? A police inspector?”

“Nah, even the police don’t stand a chance before you. What fascinates me is how lowly you think of the people’s intelligence.”

“Intelligence, you say!” Mother would burst into hysteria at this point. “You, in your sagely prudence, instigated Kuna to go abroad. I opposed it wholeheartedly because I knew he won’t be safe there. But guess who called me uneducated and small-minded then? Now that he has returned bewitched and permanently debilitated you’re going to give me a lecture on my son’s welfare?”

Father would walk out of the conversation with the same demeanor of frustration and rancor. As usual, what bothers him most is not the prospect of the lie, since we’ve long gotten used to the cloak of charades in this house. But what he can’t figure out is how these charades make Mother only more popular, influential, and invincible. An entire empire runs out of a woman’s self-belief that she gets possessed by the divine spirit, that she has the divine mandate to heal, and that she knows *tantravidya* better than any. But what evidence does she have to back her claims? What miracle has she performed so far? Her devotees swear that her eyes have magical power. What those fools don’t get is that she has naturally big eyes. On a chubby, moony face when she dilates those eyes, they acquire an uncanny element of ferocity. Further, she plays it up

by putting a fifty paise size bindi on her forehead. The package altogether looks like a cheap imitation of every possessed woman in the movies.

“Your Mother is very fortunate, Cheeku.” There in the confines of his clinic, with Hahnemann’s *The Chronic Diseases* open before him and his fingers tightly curled around his glasses, Father would say. “She has erected a castle out of falsehood. If she has not been challenged so far it’s because of the accidental nature of her success. But I fear that her castle may collapse one day and our family may get trapped under it.”

He would pause, scrawl few lines in his notepad, tap the pen, scrawl more as if he were trying to solve a puzzle. Finally, he would click off his doctor pen and set it aside. Slipping into a dark mood slowly, he would say: “A history of this town needs to be written. So the future generation can look back at us, and take our circumstance as a warning.”

“Do you want me to check again?” Sulekha shouts from the rooftop, trying to make her voice heard over the cacophony. She’s clearly excited. I hear a loud bang on the metal door of the bathroom. Then a second thud of something heavy hitting the ground. Things are being thrown at the door and ricocheting off it. That will rise the clown from the stupor I’m sure. What a coincidence that only recently the old wooden door was replaced because it was hollowed to the core by moss, water and termites. Had it been still in place then it would have been blown away by mere puff of wind.

I wonder who is throwing things with such zeal. Maybe Mantu, the groveler, has come home from the temple. I guess the word must have gotten out to him. Oh, he could not have contained his excitement upon hearing the news. The euphoria must have launched him to the moon. If one of his siblings is dead already, then one less contender

in his way to inherit Mother's wealth. He must have arrived with the entire banar sena, his paltoon (or platoon as Kuna used to rectify me) of mini-sycophants, and he must have started ordering them about to break down the door, just for the sake of appearance so that the others won't suspect the relishment he's feeling inside. By himself, Mantu won't even lift his hand to swat a fly. The effort would knock the wind off him, he would say. Ask him to come to the sea beach with you, he'll blame the breeze for riling his lungs. Ask him to come and play cricket with you, he'll say that the dry cough won't let him breathe. Ask him to talk loudly, his pitch will rise by an ant's fart. Mantu, the eldest son of this family, the ruby in Mother's crown, is actually a delicate butterfly, perpetually plagued by asthma. His lungs are as fragile as those five-rupee paper kites they sell in melas. Tug it little too hard and it will go phutt! Yet, this man has become the mastermind of Mother's entire enterprise. He has employed every possible resource and squeezed out every last available avenue to make money. He's figured out how to make the devotees pay to the temple fund every time they visit the temple. He's also the one who executed the plan to make money of Mother's souvenirs by making them more popular. And if you want to know how to make windfall out of the annual festival, he's your man. He's the visionary who gave sail to Mother's ambition, turned her from a small time hukum lady to the famous demigod, whose popularity has now even started to tinkle in the capital, hundred kilometers away from our town. Yet, Mantu swears that he does this not for personal gain, but out of pure devotion for Mother. Now, that's the sort of greasy talk I don't fall for.

There is the talk of fetching an iron-cutter from someone's workshop. But then it dawns on some ripe coconut that there's no electricity. So no point in hauling the

machine all this way. Ha! The irony is worth a bumper lottery prize. If Kuna were to die today because the door could not be cut down in time, then would Mother blame her most influential devotee, her partner in crime, for depriving the town of electricity and causing her son's death? I suddenly hear Anadi's name. A motorbike is kickstarted at the front of the house and accelerates too fast.

I hear the sage voice of the down-the-street paanwalla, consoling everybody to keep calm. Great! The entire town is congregating now. Sulekha confirms that Kuna is still lying doubled up on the floor, even though no one asks for her report. I smell camphor and incense. Cymbals are struck in the characteristic beat. Of course, the banar sena is here. Here begins the farce, ladies and gentleman, the arrival of real Devaki Devi. I can picture Mother in her puja sari (having changed into it in a heartbeat), the paraphernalia of the puja padhati spread before her, a sliced lime in one bowl, the vermilion paste as red as blood, and the palam full of camphor being fanned. This ritual called Devi Sevan is performed by Mother each evening at the temple to tame the destructive spirit of the goddess and to appease to her benevolent side. She's performing the ritual outside the bathroom door to reclaim her son back from any demonic influence. But why to blame it on an outsider? Kuna is his own worst enemy.

I see a streak of lacelike cloud floating in the blue sky. I see them uncoil and disband, slither like earthworms until they bend into distinct shapes. I see a sky full of numbers. And they don't arrange themselves into coherency, yet I sense their patterns. There's number 2 trailed by lots of 0s. Not too far is the imprint of 1,42,767. More rapidly inching toward the west sky is the number 300. And right below it is the parade of 8, 2, 4, & 3. I've been surrounded by such number floods lately. Where do they come

from and where they disappear to, I don't know. Initially, I thought my eyes were tricking me or that it was all in my head. Knowing that I'm in the constant company of people who peddle the toxicity of supernatural phenomenon, I decided to ignore these number visions. But they've started to haunt me with steady regularity. Maybe Father can prescribe a medicine for me, but then I don't even know what to name this condition. Maybe like Kuna I am losing my mind and the contagion of madness has made its first successful leap. Or maybe as the people say, having frequent visions at a young age is a sign of early death. Perhaps, I'm a doomed man.

As the cymbals halt, Mother's hoarse cry soars up: "Ma Tara, I've tied my son's life in this knot. Return him safely to me and I'll offer you double sacrifice." And suddenly as if possessed by new vigor, she shouts to Sulekha: "Aye, you little leech! Spray water through the skylight, will you? Somebody give her a water pipe. And Cheeku, where are you? I know you're lounging nearby and eavesdropping on my misery. Save your brother's life, you no-gooder! Show some heart for your own blood!"

People are chameleons, and to see them change color is the most trite and predictable thing in the world. This is the same woman who few months back fumed and wished the worst possible suffering for her own son. When Kuna arrived at the temple with two rotten coconuts strapped to his chest, barefoot, and in a parrot-colored underwear and not a shred of cloth more, Mother was in the middle of Devi Sevan with one of her important clients, a local contractor and a reliable donor to the temple's booty for years, whose blackmarketeering in chalu cement had landed him and his cronies in legal net. Mother's prognosis was that the bad spirits had to be tamed and the goddess had to be pacified if he were to escape the investigation unscathed. But most importantly,

he had to admit innocence before the goddess with a clean conscience. Could the devotee ensure that?

As he was about to swear his innocence (as I learned later), Kuna walked in to the prayer chamber twiddling the pointed tips of the coconuts salaciously. Mother sensed quickly what was impending, and in desperation she pointed to Kuna as the incarnation of a bad omen, thus confirming to the contractor his worst fear. The contractor shut his eyes tight and jammed his fists into his eye sockets to prevent further exposure to the evil specter. Mother scaled up the pitch of her tantric jibber, which in fact got drowned in the feverish din of the cymbals. The entire banar sena, the orderlies in the temple, the contractor's aid, and Mantu descended upon the prayer chamber to reign in Kuna, whose erection by then had gone too severe for his underwear to conceal. He was making himself comfortable at the corner of the chamber where the flower bed was; he was on his back, spreading his legs apart, and salivating at the sight of his fake bosom; he was moaning, like a woman, someone later said. The minions and orderlies started tossing flowers upon Kuna, trying to cover his body because by then his hand had already traveled into his underwear. They couldn't have dragged him out of the temple without a full-blown brawl. In fact, many were sure that they would have gotten grievously injured, knowing well the vigor he usually carried during his mad antics. So the only way for them to abate the situation was to cloak the sight of him. But he shook the flowers off him with the groan: "Mo chauthi!"

I wish I were there to catch the sight of Mother's face. As soon as the contractor left, Mother turned upon Kuna, who by then was drifting fast asleep by the corner after a continent-sized stain on his bright underwear. She wished upon him the goddess's wrath,

the fire of the hell, the dogs and jackals to feast on his remains, and the demonic spirit that will gnaw his marrow. Even then her rage was not finished. She chastised Mantu (the Yudhistir mind you!), the orderlies and the banar sena for letting that pervert into the divine chamber. I bet if she would have kept rebuking him then Mantu would have had the wheezing stroke of his life.

I hear hammering on the concrete and the sound of the chisel grating against the wall. Anadi is here; the most incompetent mason that you could enroll at your service. Ask him to build a fort or a mere fence wall, he would not say “No.” But it’s guaranteed that he would botch up both the assignments with equal ineptitude. When Anadi took the task of erecting Mother’s temple, no one was sure of his facility or credibility. His reputation at best remained unconfirmed and flimsily threaded to the words of a distant reference. The fact that he was not from this town and spoke clunky Oriya gave him an air of worldly experience and cosmopolitanism, which helped to corroborate the story that he had built temples in North Andhra and further down in South India. Plus, he never goes anywhere without his toolbox, which has a sticker of Jagannath plastered on the lid. He instantly qualified as a pious, dedicated and courteous artisan to be appointed as the chief mason for the temple. Over the course of four and half years, Anadi would be asked to revise the temple’s height three times as Mother’s ambition soared after her rising influence and finances. Each time he would pore over his architectural plan and conclude that it’s possible. Never did he protest that the whimsical revisions to the temple’s height could not keep soaring, and that he was a simple mason who could only design a temple he was initially contracted for, and that no way the temple’s foundation could sustain higher load than the original plan. But nah, Anadi always abided by the orders given to

him, as meticulously and impractically as he could. And when the work ended, with a disproportionately wide top and a steep side-face to the temple, he himself had not foreseen how quickly his patient and servile labor would be put to test.

When a chunk of cement fell off the temple's wall and injured a devotee, Anadi realized for the first time that the biggest threat to the temple came not from its flawed design, disproportionate dimensions, or his own incompetency, but from the force of the salty sea breeze which gnawed at the temple's face viciously and unendingly. It's remarkable that during the construction of the temple as he would have climbed the scaffolding to inspect the work and instruct the laborers, he must have felt his sweat cake in the breeze; yet, he never questioned the source of it or saw the sea to the east of him to realize the oversight in his plan. So when the concrete chunk fell, it landed straight on Anadi's sleeping wit.

"That temple won't last long," said Father when he heard the news. "How can it escape such a fundamental oversight? Anyone with common sense knows that in the coastal area salty wind eats into the concrete. And for tall structures, special planning is needed. Even huts are built here with some ingenuity."

"It can't stand a storm," I agreed.

"No, it can't!"

Father worried over the temple's stability and the safety of the people who might find themselves trapped under it. He even thought of warning Mother, but he checked himself, realizing the snake-and-mongoose clash in store for him.

Anadi though didn't realize the kind of complacency and stubbornness he was dealing with until the moment when Mother sat him down and made it clear: "That

temple stands on my belief and devotion. I'll leave it to Ma Tara to do justice, and not even a grain of sand will fall, you'll see."

It was a show of hubris from that point and Anadi was a spineless yes-sayer. No restructuring or repair was undertaken. The fate of the temple was left to pure belief. But then came another jolt when the rope traversing the height of temple snapped. This rope was the only means to scale the height of the temple for tying and changing banas at the structure's apex. No wooden or steel ladders were tall enough to reach the top ring of the temple. That meant the only option left was to prop a new scaffolding to fix the climbing rope. Apart from the expense, it would only spread the rumor that the temple's design was flawed. Also, by then no professional temple-climber in his right mind was willing to risk the ascent. The temple bulks out like a mushroom at the top as the amlabedha projects like a bulky and protruding ring. So without the rope, one has to leap like a monkey from the temple's face to catch the edge of the rim, and then scale past it to get to the top of the temple.

Anadi knew the risk. He had to, since he's the one who designed that whole mess. Yet, when Mother turned adamant that the goddess would help her figure a way out, he did not emit a tchu of objection. In fact, he cowered under Mother's delusion that nothing bad would happen to any climber who had secured the goddess's blessing. And into that bull-headed design walked in Ramesh, the boy who came to work in our house at the age of fourteen from the land of mountains. The sea was an unexpected novelty to him and he took to it like a newborn to its mother. The waves, their fall, the shells that the sea belches became his constant source of fascination. And when the idea of scaling the temple was put before him, he in his bravado took up the assignment as a child's play.

But deep down his motivation was to admire the sea from the vantage point of the temple top.

“You two don’t move!” Ramesh commanded me and Kuna, as he tightened the ends of his loincloth in the front and the back. “And if my kaccha unties and my balls peep out, don’t jeer you two! I’ll fall otherwise.” The drizzle had just started, and Kuna and I stood side by side under one umbrella. Anadi, Mother, and band of others stood ahead of us, closer to the deul’s face.

“Damn this rain!” Ramesh cursed before leaving. “I bet it will shield the sea from me. Kuna, keep your ears open. The wind will be sharp, but I’ll relay to you of how the sea looks from up there. I’ve scaled taller mountains than this back home. So you two don’t go anywhere. I’ll be up there in no time.”

When Ramesh crashed to the ground, and an arc of blood spurted out of his mouth, I realized that there was not even enough rain coming down to wash off the stream of blood that quickly moved toward where Kuna and I stood.

As I hear Anadi, chiseling the concrete off the door hinges, I remember the questions I never asked him: Anadi, do you remember Ramesh’s fall? Do you remember how Ramesh got killed? But then I’m surprised how the temple has not met any catastrophic fate yet. For nine years now it’s been standing as it is.

I hear the nara of “Jindabaad.” A contingent of supporters drive by the road, hailing MLA Khalnaik’s name. They must be rally-bound and from the megaphone they entreat the listeners to “elect their beloved leader.” Oh, I will! You just watch. When the voting gets done in October, I’ll be at the head of the line to cast my first vote ever and I’ll ensure to cast it against that beloved sister-fucker of yours. But that in itself won’t be

enough retaliation, since in the meantime, the conspiracy about prasad will flourish and I won't learn how grave Mother's crime is.

When Mother calls my name again, I finally get up. The commotion is now hitting fever pitch. I head over to the cattle shed. On a slab by the roof is kept the funnel and the tube that are used to administer medicine to the cows and their younglings. Across the shed by the vegetable yard are two clay pails. I puncture a hole into the bottom of one of them with a pointed stone. One light tap and a finger size hole cracks open. By the sacks of the fodder, there are red chilies left to dry. I collect fistful of them. To the left of the backyard there are mounds of coconut shells. Most of them are soggy, moss-bitten, and thick with the pungent odor of wet coir. It takes time to fish out the dried ones, which I stack densely in the unpunctured pail in layers with a bed of chilies between them. On my way to bathroom, I pick up the matchbox tucked under the asbestos roof of the back-shade, where Sulekha keeps it to light the fire for the outdoor stove. I light the match and drop it into the pail.

As I walk in to the backyard, Sulekha spots me first, with the water pipe in her hand. "Cheeku is here!" she shouts. Even though I don't look at her directly, I know her pose is full of reprove. Mother too gives me the same treatment. The menace in the pail are about to crack open. Anadi has gotten to the second hinge so far. He steps back as I approach. I sit the pail upside down adjacent to the door jamb and cup the hole tightly with the funnel. The joint of the pails are tight enough against leak. As I insert the tube deep through the bottom clearance of the door, I see the smoke clouding the pipe.

"What are you up to?" Mother asks. "What's in that pail?" I don't answer. "Cheeku, I will split you in two if your brother gets hurt."

I say, “Do you know how they smoke the rats and snakes out from their burrows?”

“Stop laughing, you rascal! You’ll choke him to death.”

Anadi and Mantu maintain distance. But the banar troop slowly closes in. From the roof of the bathroom the maid peeps down. I turn my head toward Father, who sits on the steps to the house’s back entrance. He shakes his head disapprovingly, so I stop laughing. As the smoke pressure rises, it breaches the seam. I stop breathing and squint my eyes. Not too long now. Mild coughing at first. Then searing ones. And at last everything is burning. By the time the bout of coughing begins, Mother howls that I am killing her son. But before I am tackled, the door is flung open and out he leaps in his bright green underwear. Kuna darts out emitting a shriek, cough and groan, with one hand covering the eyes and the other tugging his beard hard. With the strides of a long-jumper, he disappears.

Blast of smoke hits me when the door is flung. It’s like burning embers are shoved down my windpipe. And before others could retreat, I toss the pail over my shoulder and it lands in the middle of onlookers, splitting loudly, and spewing out the mayhem bullet-speed. Curses and threats follow, but we all join in a chorus of gasping and wheezing. I hear Anadi grunt. But that’s the only thing he manages to utter before being crushed by stroke of coughing. I close my eyes, wishing that my tear glands would flood, purging the chili from my eyes. As I lay doubled up and wishing for my lungs to be rubbed with ice, I’m gripped by this sudden illumination that whatever might be smuggled as prasad, it will lead to Shama’s death.

CHAPTER IV
THE BATTLE OF THE FISHES

13th April, 1999

I turn toward Father and find him immersed in Praharaj's book. He has asked me several times to read his works. "These books about our past are very important, Cheeku," he would say, "otherwise, how would you know if we as a civilization progressed or regressed? Aren't you afraid of being wrong?" I wouldn't reply. "Cheeku, you dropped out of the college of your own will. To your Mother it doesn't matter. She views education with suspicion. But I can't tolerate the fact that none of my children completed their education or went on to become somebody." I still wouldn't reply. I could argue with him. I could tell him that I don't want to end up like Kuna, but that sort of response would pain him deeply. "Cheeku, you have a gift of perception that's rare for any one of your age. So don't squander what you're endowed with."

I sit on the steps to Father's chamber, my back propped against the door jamb. The elusive sea breeze teases me from time to time as if inviting me on a game of chase. Father sits in the chair, by the piles of books on the table, the lantern perking up its light moodily. Father used to have a mustache, a dark and bushy one. But he started greying prematurely, and he has come to fashion this clean-shaven look for some time now. These days it's difficult to spot a strand of black hair on his head; oddly though the density of his hair has remained the same. Moreover, Father used to be bodily wider than

Mother, more muscular and imposing. But over the years, as Mother grew rounder in dimension, Father seemed to have shrunk in size. His slender frame occupies only half of the wooden chair. Further, his square-framed spectacles lend him a meeker appearance, as if he were content to watch the battle from behind the protection of those transparent barriers.

This room is father's all-in-one office, meeting room, study room, siesta retreat, private sanctuary, and clinic. Since the time Mother disconnected electricity to Father's chamber out of spite, he has not switched on the overhead lamp. Even after Mother ordered for the electricity to be restored, Father stuck to the lantern stubbornly. And now it looks like he relishes this primitive lighting system without having to worry about the power cuts.

But today the turmoil is so great in him that no artificial light can dispel his dark mood. His concentration is extra sharp today so that his mind can shield the din of the rituals that will float from the temple at any moment. Plus, the drama party must be getting ready to perform that tired annual play in which the earthly incarnation of the goddess will slay the demon Raktabija. Sixteen years back on this day Mother got possessed for the first time. And as is the custom, the goddess's spirit in her will crank up to its most vicious manifestation at the end hour tonight and then it will peter out by the sun up tomorrow. Father retreats to his most favorite books when he's the most agitated. And tonight he won't touch the homeopathy books; instead he'll seek comfort in poetry and essays. I look at the plaque that occupies a special corner on his bookshelf. It says: *Similia Similibus Curantur*. Latin for "Likes cure likes." Father says that this is the

principle upon which the homeopathic remedy stands and believing it makes one a truly successful healer.

“Sir!” comes the call. Father and I look up in surprise. By the frangipani tree stands a tall, lanky figure. Emerging from the shadow, he introduces himself as Sisir Bhumia. His strides are long, and he doesn’t even wait for me to move off his path. He steps over me and right away launches into it: “Sir, you’re sitting by the lantern? What happened to the electricity?” This man seems to know a lot about our family (practically, the whole town knows by now), and he can rub it in. His movements are nervous like leaping frogs in restless water.

He says, he has visited surgeons, medics, and quacks in all possible quarters. But none could cure him. “Homeopathy will be my savior,” he swears. “Ask me Rajguru Babu, your list of questions. These days doctors won’t even ask what’s wrong with you. Thok thok they write the prescription as if the symptoms are written on my forehead. My friends tried to dissuade me saying if eminent doctors couldn’t cure you then what will Rajguru Babu do? He’ll ask you bizarre questions. Plus, you don’t want to be on the wrong side of Devaki Devi. But I’m not superstitious, Sir, neither were my forefathers.”

Father unties the knot of his records folder, takes a blank sheet out of it, folds it exactly in the middle along the height, and puts the patient number on top corner which is a single digit at this point. The ruler rests upon the tip of the paper to avoid flutter in the wind. “Age?” asks Father. “Name?...Marital status?...How many children?”

Bhumia answers them faithfully, and goes on to describe his ailment.

“So you’ve abdominal pain you say. It’s of inconsistent nature, it’s spreading and that’s the way it has always been?”

“Precisely, Sir! Years ago, when my third child was not even born, the pain was confined to the lowest rib on my left. Now, it has spread up to the right waist. Imagine the distance it’s traveled.”

“Describe the pain. Is it a throbbing or sore pain?”

“It’s like neither I can tell you. But please note that it’s spreading.”

“Again, what kind of pain do you feel? A throbbing or a sore one?”

Bhumia sighs. He rubs his belly with the tenderness of a pregnant woman. “It starts with the throbbing sign, and once it’s gone the soreness fills in.”

“Fills in? How? Describe the sensation of filling in?”

“Like air filling into a tube. Like water filling in an empty jug. The soreness comes and stays.”

“At that time, is the sensation hot or cold?”

Bhumia closes his eyes and stares at the ceiling, hoping the memory will come to his aide. “That’s tricky, Sir! Pain is pain, isn’t it?”

“Again, try to recollect. Is it hot or cold?”

“Which is the most damaging? Pick that one. It has to be that one.”

“You must remember accurately if you want to get the right medicine.”

Bhumia emits the sound of a confused animal. Some time back a mother brought her son to Father for treatment. She wanted the child to ace his class. “He really wants to,” she said. “But every time the result comes the brighter students manage to outscore him and it disappoints him thoroughly. My Grand Uncle, a reputed hand in Homeopathy himself used to say that Homeopathy, unlike the other medicines, targets the root cause of the malady. Find the cause of my son’s lackluster performance, Rajguru Babu, and

eradicate it completely.” Father assumed a very sympathetic look and didn’t even spare a glance at the young lad. He spoke straight to the mother without picking up his doctor pen or untying his record folder: “I’ve no medicine to offer him. I hope he never finds the shortcut he’s looking for.”

After that snub when the mother left with her son in bustling discomfort, Father said to me, “If I could write the history of our people then I would dedicate an entire volume to the topic of mediocrity.” And I looked past him at the attaché in which he stores globules and tinctures in a series of identical vials: what use are they of?

“Are you naturally an anxious person?” asks Father to Bhumia.

“Shouldn’t I be anxious? Imagine yourself as the father of six children. None of them upon their feet yet, and I, their father, their only hope, can’t be cured of a belly ache. How would that make you feel?”

“Do your hands and feet sweat when you’re anxious?”

“Nah, unless I’m dreaming.”

“Do you get bad dreams?”

He thinks because he knows by now that he can’t get away with vagueness. “Yes, sometimes. And they’re dark.”

“Describe them for me.”

“Tremendous noise, sir, of wind or waves I don’t know. I am searching for shelter, but I’m locked outside my house. My wife peeps through the window and gestures me to keep out. I yell at her. I curse her for her thick-headedness. I ask her to let me in instantly. She’s the type who won’t even shed a tear if I were to die. But I see tears in her eyes. My youngest one, sonpampadi I fondly call her, waves at me from the inside

of the house with a snapped rope in her hand. Suddenly she disappears into a vortex of water inside the house, followed by my wife, and I wake up—”

“With pain in your stomach?”

“Precisely! How did you know?”

When Father made it known that he would start a homeopathic practice, Mother was absolutely unforgiving. She called Father a petty-minded rival who was trying to erode her influence by opening a competing healing practice. “Do you think I don’t understand your motive?” she said. “You want to heal people, is it? Where was your passion for homeopathy all these years? Where was your medicinal knowledge hiding? You want to humiliate me before the entire town. You want to lure my devotees away with your quackery. You want to retaliate for the jealousy that’s burning you inside.” Mother decreed that she wouldn’t allow a clinic in her house, not as long as she lived.

From the money that Father received from his voluntary retirement, he constructed for himself a detached chamber, which for all practical purposes can be dubbed as an outhouse. He didn’t want a window in his clinic; just four walls that could be packed to the ceiling with books and medical charts. The day he was about to start his clinic Mother ordered the local electrician to cut off the power. For over two months, she was steadfast in her reprisal, taunting him at the dinner time: “Did you have any patient yet?”

Each evening for those two months, Father faithfully filled the lantern’s tank with kerosene, and when the heat would turn oppressive in his small room, he would walk up to the door with a book in his hand for fresh air. Later even that need was omitted as he got used to the four walls of the clinic. I too came to like the shy, golden hue of his room

in the evening. I came to lounge by the steps to the clinic, rocking my legs to the tune of the breeze and giving Father silent company until one of us would speak first. When Mother deemed her strategy to be ineffective, the electricity was restored to the room. But by then the need for lights and fan was already put behind. A routine that was established out of combative tenacity became a source of comforting predictability.

In those early days, I anxiously waited for patients to arrive. If only one of them would show up then Father could prove how effective his medicine was. The word would travel in the town. Sick folks would flock to him, and with the rising ranks of beneficiaries, Father's reputation would soar in our town and beyond. He would then have succeeded unnerving Mother. It would have become a legendary rivalry, a fierce combat whose outcome would have been decided by the sheer number of patients one had healed. I would have kept count for Father, and managed the long queues outside his clinic. But Father showed no spirit of rivalry or angst to counter the ridicule hurled at him. Two months went, four, and then six. The walls of his chamber stood witness to the movements of same twin shadows. By the time the first patient came my excitement had already depleted. Father had gotten used to Mother's sneer. It was like the turtle had accepted defeat, picked up a book, and climbed a tree to watch the hare win.

I leave Father and Bhumia in the middle of their circuitous conversation; Bhumia's frustration is mounting. He can't supply enough answers he's realizing.

The hillock on which the temple stands peaks behind the line of chakundas that covers the horizon. I open the gate, and turn to the road; fresh layer of tar shines chik-chik under the streetlight. The light poles are evenly spaced and alternately punctuated on either side of the street. Not one of them is fused or burning an ounce of less wattage. No

other street in our town can claim for itself such upkeep and flourish. Years ago, this street enjoyed no status; just a puny, petered-out gully it was. When the temple was built on the hillock, this road became the sole link to the temple. The traffic steadily increased and soon the road came to be known as the Temple Road, establishing its importance uncontestably. As Khalnaik became the MLA, it prompted the BDO himself to be present to inspect the road work, followed by the SDO of the electricity office to oversee the lighting.

Before the slope of the road could rise toward the hillock, I veer off toward the beach. The temple would erupt into cacophony any time now. Aarti, jhanja, sankirtan...an assortment of rituals to follow. But this is only the beginning. The prayers of the evening will yield to the play, in which Mother, after a week-long fasting, will make her first public appearance of the day on the stage. Through a rottenly contrived trick but stubbornly executed, the lights will be turned off and she will be sneaked to the stage, replacing the lead actress playing Chandika. In the middle of such stupendous theatrics, worthy of applause from a back alley magician, the spotlight will resume on Mother's swaying and convulsive figure, while the demon Raktabija will be lying on the stage floor in anticipation to be slaughtered, with a pouch of fake blood tucked under his armor. The background music will rise to crescendo. Mother will wield the trident as she soars to the crest of her possessed state. The trident will come down. The demon Raktabija will fold up, let out a cry, scoot his head closer to where the trident lands and manage to puncture the packet of the tomato sauce under his heavy necklace. The devotees will erupt: Ma Devaki Devi ki, Jai! And later Mother will perform "fire-walk," by treading on coal embers packed in a trench as deep as couple of feet. Nothing

spectacular about that walk, believe me. I've seen kids as young as twelve do this like a stroll on the beach. All you need is quick feet and fading embers.

I enter the casuarina groves. Low-hanging branches force me to duck. When Kuna and I were little, we would race through these groves unhindered. One time we darted to the beach where a shankar fish had got trapped in the sand. The fish was not even dead yet and the haggling had begun about who would get its tail. Bada Samantray won the bid and from that day Kuna renamed him as Bada Stingray. He would snigger each time he would run into him, marveling at the word "stingray" as if it were the best invention since spaceships. I guess even then he had a touch of lunacy in him.

Out of the groves, I emerge to the beach. The run of the sand unfolds to the sea, to the sky, to the stars, and so on. The wind kicks alive contours of my body even unknown to me. I shuffle through the sand, against the wind yet with such ease. Maybe this is how it feels being off the ground, defying gravity, floating feather light. Past the lighthouse, where the run of the casuarina groves briefly breaks, the huts of fishermen's slum dot the night. Lights from the huts emerge like embers and when a blade of light from the lighthouse glides past them, they blink, slow style. Closer to the water, anchored in the sand are the boats, an entire row of them, side by side, bare and skeletal. Rowboats, motorboats, dinghies, wooden boats, fibreglass boats. Cast upon them are the crisscrosses of the gillnets, disco nets, bamboo poles, and tarpaulins. In that area perpetually lingers the stench of rotten fish that no amount of wind can dispel. Add to that the jumble of shanties, trash-littered alleys, slovenly toddlers shitting and pissing indiscriminately, and their crass-mouthed mothers itching to go off on epic quarrels with their neighbors. At the night time the ground is a ticking hazard. Rusted fishing hooks, nails, tin splinters lay

discarded in the sand. How do those children never fall prey to a misstep in that crass litter is beyond me. Maybe the veins of the sea life mirror in them. They dodge the traps with the same intuition as the fishes.

If Shama were there in his hut today, I would have gone to see him and drawn him out for a conversation. His worries are always the same: the mounting debt, the shared expense of the boat, the foreign trawlers that are plundering the sea, the distance he has to travel these days for a decent catch, his father, his children, his wife, and his neighbor. But once he's done venting, he'll invariably fall back to the stories of the sea, his recent adventures, and crude gossips. For some time now, Shama has been insisting that I should accompany him into the sea. He's full of the weird notion that I'll attain some kind of enlightenment in the middle of the sea. He's generally condescending toward the intelligence of the land mammals. He gives the example of the whales to prove his point. But I doubt if he has ever seen a whale. The more I try to wiggle out of our planned trip to the sea, the more he seems to enjoy bringing it up.

I know that tonight Shama won't be home. Recently, he's been lucky with his catches, and when he's on a run like that nothing can hold him back. Not even illness. But then again these fishermen seldom fall ill. Even if they do then the sea is like remedial bathwater for them.

Before the temple was constructed, the fishefolks' slum was closer to the hillock which hosts the temple. Their activities courted the area too closely, a fact which bothered Mother from the outset. Their children would go to defecate in the backwoods. Their loose women would frolic with the vagabonds of the town after the dusk by the

hillock foot. For all practical purposes, the place was a large dumpyard for the fishermen. Everything dead and spent made its way there.

The spot had gained quite a notoriety and it nagged Mother that the place that was about to become the hub of her sanctimonious empire could get so easily encroached by the licentious ways of the people who don't even speak her tongue properly. A year after the temple was built and a few months after Khalnaik became MLA, she moved to protect the borders of the hillock not by erecting an electric fence, an option she must have entertained I'm sure, but by displacing the entire colony further south of the beach. Quite a tumult broke out. Fishing folks armed themselves with machetes and cleavers. They threatened to cut off the access to the beach. They even threatened to poison the fish. Most determined were the women folks who were more connected to the land than their sea-sloshed husbands. Their rancor turned so vile that the licentious contingent refused to entertain their clientele and even beat them up upon coercion. It took the full support of the MLA, two van loads of the police battalion, a party of hired thugs, and a magisterial order to bring the dispute to a showdown.

Shama, a firebrand and quite a match for any roughshodder, was one of the leaders in the protest. He strategized the retaliation and speed at which their blades would come down. And it was his idea to tuck gaffs at the back of their lungis as a surprise weapon. Amrish Puri, the police inspector of our town, is not a guy who enjoys an enviable reputation; his cross-eyed vision gets in the way of any commanding position that he could assert. In fact, it is believed that the only time he had to use his gun he did not get his target in the leg as he was planning but in the neck. His subordinates even swear that in the event of possible gun use they will rather risk their jobs than put

themselves ahead of their superior. To Kuna, the inspector's name was a constant source of amusement. He once wrote his real name on a piece of paper and showed it to me: Amrish Rashmi. "Do you get it?" he asked. When I shook my head, he laughed. Tears welling up in his eyes, he laughed: "That's a man born to be cross-eyed." For me though, his name changed to Amrish Puri when I became aware of his villainy.

The day Amrish Puri arrived with the court order in his hand, no one had fully estimated the fierce loyalty he was capable of carrying behind those perpetually deviating eyes. The night before he had a closed door meeting with Mother and the MLA. And a couple of hours later when he emerged from the room, his underlings were surprised by the newfound purpose and briskness in the man. The heel of his boots clicked they said and his first piece of instruction to his men was: "Tell your wives to make you a nice fish curry tonight. It may be a while before you'll have another."

As Amrish Puri wielded the court order before the fishermen under a flash bright sky, Shama and his fellows tried to gauge the inspector's determination behind those skewed eyes. The inspector was accompanied by only two subordinates, while the rest of the battalion sat in the vehicles. The only precaution he took was to unbutton the flap of his holster. "Listen," Amrish Puri addressed to no one in particular, or maybe he did but it was hard to tell. "I am ready to let my firearm rust a little longer if you men are willing to listen keenly to what I am about to say."

"Abey tera," yelled out a fisherman from the back, "do you get the hole right when you fuck your wife?"

The position of his eyes did not change, and neither did anyone spot the bitter insult he must have swallowed. The inspector continued: "This area here is not your

property. I've the court order in my pocket to prove so. Besides, many of you won't have proper papers to produce if it comes to that. But I am not here to talk to you about legalities. Things will happen here not in the light of justice but in the darkness of the night." Saying so he tucked the court order in his pocket, and upon his signal a Jeep full of men rolled into view. Their appearance gave them away instantly as criminals and roughnecks of the worst kind. And their gaze was trained in the direction of the hutments where women and children stood in wretched anticipation.

"We dare you to take a step in their direction," said the eldest leader. "We know how to take care of our women and children."

"No one is interested in them," replied Amrish Puri. "Take my word. None of my men will lay a hand on them. It's the other kinds of danger that you need to worry about. I bet those boats of yours don't have enough salt and water in them to keep away a stray fire. And the fish you are about to supply to the feasts next month. People could fall ill you know. And then guess whose threat of fish-poisoning people would remember? The law would then catch up with you not as illegal squatters but as criminals. So I am going to go back and sit in my vehicle until one of you comes to his sense and asks, 'Why does it matter where we live? Two furlongs here or there. It's just sand, isn't it?'"

He turned around and left. Behind him the fisherfolks reiterated their defiance: "Oh, we won't even fart upon such threats?" "This entire beach is our home and we'll live wherever we want to." "Go and suck the tits of the woman on whose order you're dancing." None of the policemen and the hired goons left. Their strategy went beyond posturing, for which the fisherfolks were not prepared. Soon a truck pulled in further up the road. Neither did its driver nor his assistant step out. But the blue, greasy barrels

stacked in the back of the truck gave the clear impression of what was in them. When Shama and his men made a run toward the truck, the thugs came out of their cars. One of them held a revolver out and high enough to leave no room for doubt. As the two groups stood facing each other, the inspector's Jeep leisurely crawled in. "Give them some time to think it over," he said to the man with the revolver. "And when you start, make it quick so that the police won't be blamed for arriving too late. Don't hold back on the women. I've changed my mind."

When the entire police contingent left, it became clear to the fisherfolks the sadistic nature of the eviction plan. By pedigree, fisherfolks are a nomadic bunch. Getting uprooted from the land was nothing new to them. Many authorities and lawmen have arrived before with decrees in their hands and the black wings of the law on their side. But then none before had so serenely relegated their official duties to a band of ruffians. At the fervent pleadings of their wives, the rattled fisherfolks finally retreated. Intense deliberations followed into late hours of the night. A few of them gave in easily to their shattered nerves, and in the quietness of the night they navigated their boats off to the safety of the distant beaches. All this time the goon squad and the kerosene truck reeking of its diabolic load did not budge from their positions. When Amrish Puri returned the next morning, he had a peace offer to make: "Those of you who don't want bloodletting, we will offer a truck to move your belongings to your new home. Your tin shacks will take roots there in no time. You may speak ill of Devaki Devi, but you've no idea of her generosity." In a few hours, the fishermen disbanded and decided to leave. The kerosene truck was stripped off its load and put to the use of ferrying the fisherfolks' belongings. Shama was the last one to leave.

“If she started this war with kerosene,” Shama would later say, “then it must end with fire. Bhari kina she thinks she could uproot an entire colony and not even a drop of ash would be left behind? My Baba scared me in my bachpan about this magar fish, this really ajeeb creature who would not forget a wound from a harpoon. It chased boats after boats, toppled them and left behind bodies with their heads chewed off. That sea na, that entire stretch, came to be known as suicide water. Even after they captured and killed the fish with the help of a whaling ship, the water remains haunted. No boatman in his right mind would go near that area. Eppudu! I am that fish, Cheeku. I’m the one who will chew her head off one day. I don’t care if you’re her son. I will tell you this right in your face; the fish that she wounded will come for her head.”

Mother doesn’t know of my friendship with Shama. If she knew then her fury would combust the sanity out of her. She’s averse to anything fish-related, because she’s a dogged vegetarian. No meat or fish has ever entered our house. Not even eggs. All the sacrifice done to the goddess is distributed among the devotees. So I first met Shama when days after the eviction he came to the house with a basketful of fish. He knew very well that no vendor is allowed inside the premise of the house. When he called out to see Devaki Rajguru, referring to Mother by her fullname, it caused quite a stir. Mother appeared before him, all charged up. He said pointing to the fish basket: “These fishes na escaped from your side of the beach to ours. So I came to return them.” In a single motion, he put the basket down and started lobbing the fishes at the house as if they were unplugged grenades. In spite of Mother’s shrieks and threats, he kept tossing them high and far, and the fishes went all over the roof, the courtyard, and as far back as the rear compound.

A seven-day cleansing exercise was undertaken by Mother, whereas Amrish Puri was summoned to teach the offender a lesson. But then they concluded that pursuing the matter further would lead to another stand-off. Instead, if they let it pass then the fisherfolks would ease into the idea that the scores were now even. Years later though, Shama would tell me otherwise as we became good friends: “What she saw is only a preview. The real tufan will come later.”

I wish Shama was here tonight. Talking to him would have purged the venom in me. The magnet of humbuggery that’s about to trap all the sanity of this planet may have spared me. But then seeing Shama these days is like dropping a boulder into my murky mind. I haven’t told him about my suspicion of the ice factory yet, not even asked him if he or any other fisherman was approached by somebody to deliver a consignment of “prasad.” How could I drop such a question casually? Shama will be curious about how I learned about the whole thing. He’s a canny bird. He knows how to unravel a yarn all the way to its end. If I don’t watch out then he will pick Mother’s role in it. But then I also don’t want Shama to land in trouble, considering his rivalry with Mother. Or is he already aware of something that he isn’t telling me? Fuck it. Fuck it all. My mind is like a blazing comet in moments like these. It splits and splinters in all directions. I hate her for putting me through this, for daring to malign the family. And someone needs to clip her wings, humiliate her, and check her megalomaniac ambitions. It’s the play, yes, that figurative showpiece of her omnipotence, starting from there...MLA Khalnaik will be there tonight. If I can foil the play, then it will bludgeon their smugness about their supremacy. It will remind them that there are bigger fishes in the sea than them. I turn around and head in

the direction of the temple, where the ruckus of devotional songs and chants is already bloodying the night like a massacre.

When I arrive at the temple's fairground, the area is kindled with carnival spirit. The chaat and goopchoop stalls teem with snackers like buzzards around a carcass. The balloonman pumps out shapes from flaccid balloons like a conjurer, and the toy vendors fire up trick lights for little customers. To tempt the girls and ladies alike there are carts of saris, chunris, beads, cosmetics, and sandals. The medicine peddler at the far end is busy administering his "most popular product" to a bunch of shy and pimply-faced youths. From the other end, the electric generator pumps life into the fluorescent and halogen lamps atop the poles. Its dense fuming carves a channel in the dark night. In case the religious purpose of the occasion is forgotten, there are booths by the compound wall, selling consecrated wares and souvenirs of the goddess and Mother. The banar sena manage these booths, dispensing the customers' requests from the height of the booth floor with equal dash of arrogance and lethargy. A bus load of money will be made tonight at these booths. Add to that the fee the vendors will pay for being given a spot at the fairground. Mantu, that man! He can sell husk at a higher price than the grain.

I head in the direction of the stage, where the central entertainment of the night will unfold. The modest appearance of the raised platform belies the bolt of propaganda it is about to unleash. Magenta bright bandanas spiral around the corner posts of the podium. Details, mind you. This is the same color sari in which Mother will appear

before the crowd. When you have an army of sycophants, it is a race in boot-licking. Needs are manufactured here. Serving opportunities are hatched.

One sena member spots me and elbows another hastily. As the word catches up, the troop fixes their gaze at me as if I were a banana bunch. I pinch out my paita from under my shirt long enough to wrap a circle around my neck like a noose. A theatric tug to the thread and my tongue lolls out. This sends the right signal to the thugs, since they immediately avert their gaze and get busy in their affairs. But I know that the news will be relayed to Mantu right away and I have to hurry up.

Behind the back screen of the stage, the drama troupe has camped. I scan for the man who will play demon. If I can corner him for a few minutes, maybe I can shock his nerves a bit and watch him bungle the play by doing something stupid. I have an instinct for these drama people. Each year they are brought for free on the bait of piety, feast, and goodwill. Naturally, when they figure out the scheme and how they're swindled of money, they never return. You may think that the word would have traveled far enough to alert every drama party out there. But no, there is always a troupe, more clueless and desperate than the previous one. There was this demon actor the first year who had to be kept away from his ganja stash and who could not get into his head the idea of an actress swap. Another time there was this actor, packing some delusional stardom, who kept harping that playing a demon is not his specialty. When he figured out the gamed plot of the play, he stirred up quite a mutiny among his cohorts. The audience ganged up against him. But as a compromise, he offered a poetic soliloquy and the dark tales of his past. It was then left to the effeminate director of the troupe and his broken accent to ham out the

role of demon. Quite a racket and jeering from the crowd he weathered until Mother appeared to relieve his misery.

So I search for my man, and there in the obscure corner he sits, currently taking an oil massage from a helper. His torso glistens even in low light. His breasts do not sag. His belly does not curve like a globe, which was the case with another actor another time. His mustachio seems firm and genuine. As another assistant reads his lines to him, he repeats the words silently. The measured manner he seems to possess...boy, did Mantu land a professional drama company this time? I look around. The lead actress is a shapely woman, putting on make-up with the help of another. The music players are busy taking firm guidelines from the director. These folks seem to have manpower and personal costume trunks. The play won't be as easily foiled as I thought. Or maybe they are lied to. In which case, a tug to the loose end will untie the entire arrangement.

I perch myself atop a trunk, close enough to the demon actor to draw his attention, while through the corner of my eyes I scan the distant crowd to detect the approaching sign of Mantu and his gang. At last when the script reader leaves and the actor is done repeating the lines, he gives me a cursory nod and that's it.

So I venture to initiate the conversation. "What brings you here?" I ask.

"What does it look like?" he responds in irritation, extending his arms. Spectacular! That's quite some haughtiness for a man who is about to be slain in matter of hours. I change my tactic.

"You misunderstand me. Some actors agree to perform out of devotion to my mother and others for the sheer thrill of the carnival. So which side you belong to?"

“Mother, did you say? You mean you’re the son of Ma Devaki Devi?” I sniff him out there, in between the lines, as his curiosity scales. Living with a bunch of sycophants has attuned me to their soft spots. Drop the right hint, and there they go like a circus dog, dancing and pirouetting on their hind legs. “Pattnaik Sir saw the performance of our drama party in Cuttack last year,” he says. That’s MLA Khalnaik for you. “And there he secured a promise from our director to come and perform here. But later I heard a lot about the miracle that your mother is, and now, I can’t wait to meet her in person.”

An eloquent ass-licker is a dangerous kind. They always know when to hold back and how to assign each word due weight. I’ve not seen this man’s acting yet, but I can tell he takes it seriously. This much is obvious that what brings him here is not the desire to meet Mother, but to impress the MLA. A man with a farsighted mission like that won’t squander his chances that easily, not for a pot of liquor or any sentimental appeal. The best chance I have is to rattle his confidence.

“An actor like you must be wondering, right?”

“About what?” He sits amused.

“The strangeness of the play, where at the climax the actor is swapped with another person. Why you must be asking? Why should a completely unrelated person take credit for the hard work of a performer?”

“But we’re not talking of an ordinary play, right?”

“Hmmm!”

“How can an actor quibble about his dues when he’s asked to step back for a divine figure? The people of this town revere your mother and not us actors. If they’re coming to watch the play for her then their wishes need to be respected.” He pauses after

giving me a stellar lesson on humility. But as an afterthought, he adds: “Who am I to tell you this? You must know this already as a host, unless you wanted to put me through a test.”

I put my best sheepish expression on display. A touch of overacting maybe. I wring my fingers, appearing awkward and nervous.

“Aa ha!” The actor thumps his foot in excitement, and the shudder carries all the way to the tips of his mustache. “I knew it from the moment you started asking such obvious questions. But I also suspect that you’ve not come here on your own. You’re just a messenger. So tell me, who sent you to canvass me?”

He still carries a jovial expression, not tempted to test his limits with me. I drive deep my dewy-eyed innocence. “I failed,” I say. “Ah, Mantu will be so mad at me. The one task he trusted me with...but, you won’t fail us, right?”

“Why should I?”

“I don’t know! You’re an actor and he was an actor too. You give them one line and they say another. Last time, as soon as the swap occurs and the light comes back, this actor says, looking straight at Mother, ‘Who are you?’ The audience gnashed their teeth. They would have roasted him alive. Mother had to improvise on top of her possessed stupor. ‘Fool, I am your death,’ she tells him. ‘But where is Kadambini?’ the swine replies back.”

“He sounds like an amateur to me.”

“More like a racketeer. That’s why the trident landed on his shoulder. Serves him right...”

“You mean the actor got injured?” he asks in a tone grave enough to give me hope.

I spot in distance the approaching pack of banars. I get up and prepare to slip to the actresses’ section any minute. “Now now, you’ll get everything out of me and Mantu will berate me for talking too much. I’ll just report to him that everything looks good here.”

“Hold on a second!” the actor protests, turning toward me. “I understand that your Mother gets possessed. Will she mistake me for the real demon?”

“No! Didn’t they give you the pouch of fake blood? Why should you lose confidence then?”

“I’m a confident actor!” he asserts in frustration. “You can ask the MLA Sir for his word.”

“If so then are you going to let him down and leave the play for a one-time accident?” It hits him. To see him squirm is indeed spectacular. As if a spring comes apart in him, his shoulders slouch and his chest sags.

“Many actors underestimate the seriousness of the play and the audience’s expectation riding on it,” I offer to him as my parting gift. “They take the stage, swashbuckling high egos as it completely escapes them that the play is not about them. So as long as you’ve a pure conscience nothing bad will happen to you I bet, and Mother’s blessings will fulfil your wishes.” I retreat fully to the actresses’ area, leaving the actor in his sinkhole of doubt. He can consult with the director if he likes, but what advice can he give? The actor won’t reveal his ulterior motive of impressing the MLA, and the director on his part, who is stuck like a broken record with the music party on

some tak-thai note, will not be thrilled to hear that on top of everything his lead actor is now having a crisis of confidence.

By the time the Banar troop can see me clearly, I've planted myself before the main actress. I lean easy against a pole, and soak up the middle-aged beauty, the curvy geometry of her figure. The fake necklaces and the tight line of the blouse cover her in such a comprehensive way that I can't help but comment: "Do you always play goddess or they save you for better roles?"

She angles her gaze past me in a nonchalant way. A whistle escapes me. Soon the Sena boys descend upon me, followed by Mantu who glows like neon in his tasar silk robe. But before he can speak and betray our animosity to the demon actor, I ask, "Is Mother looking for me?" He does not respond, but stands there, sizing up the situation. "The director seems to have done a splendid job," I say, nodding in the direction of the actresses. Mantu senses the approaching trouble. If he does not act discreetly, he knows that I will dump a load of lewd remarks which will offend not only his saintly presence but undermine Mother's reputation.

"Some of the boys have never seen a drama crew," he says, trying to avoid confrontation. "So I thought of bringing them here. Now, why not four of you stay back? Make yourself useful if they need anything." That last line perks up the minions who read the commandment as the license to scrutinize me. I am sure the banar gang is gloating in self-importance tonight. With few of them and Sulekha already keeping a watch over Kuna so that he doesn't escape from his locked-room and now me, it's like jackals are handed out an easy prey.

Mantu turns to leave, and the actor, who has been standing by in impatience and sensitive to Mantu's presence, interjects: "Mantu Babu, I am not a vegetarian but I am a pious man, I swear. You can count on my clean conscience."

Mantu, touched and confused by the actor's outburst of complaisance, replies back: "Mother will be happy to hear that."

I loiter around the actresses a while, appearing extra solicitous and sneaking peeks at their dynamite danas. Though I am ignored by them, it helps to cement the idea in the minds of Mantu's sentries that I had no other aim to be here other than hover around these juicy flowers. Time to slip out from here. Time to put in action the rest of the plan. In passing, I bid ta-ta to the actor, who under distress has started applying a fresh coat of oil. The shine bouncing off his skin can now light an entire bazaar.

Less than an hour later the play begins. The stage's periphery gets fastidiously checked and guarded by the sena minions. The two brightest lamps mounted atop the corner posts are saved for Mother's entry. The piece of lighting effect is a new addition this year. The crowd slowly files and navigates toward the stage, as the vending activity is forcibly stopped. No parallel activity are tolerated that may win the spectators away from the play. But this rule does not apply to the sale of temple paraphernalia and souvenirs. MLA Khalnaik gets a deluxe seat to himself in the front row, of course, with the double cushioned and flower patterned upholstery. He sits with another person under the chandua awning, who I do not know. Amrish Puri flanks the MLA on the right in a modest plastic chair. A small contingent of police constables stands on the fringes of the crowd. So between piety and the rule of law, there's no room for hooliganism tonight.

I search for a spot close to the stage, close enough that I can meet the eyes of the actors, but not so close that my movements can be restrained by the banar herd. In my search, I discover Chandrakanta among the women folk. Voluptuous and proud she sits, toying with her long braid, claverling with her friend, and disregarding me. Stubbornness runs through her head as dense as the sewers of a mega metropolis. I will deal with her later. Even if I succeed, she won't run up to me and embrace me as the hero. She will instead blame me for ruining her evening's entertainment.

The director takes up the anchoring role. He politely thanks the "dignitaries" among the crowd for "consecrating the play with their presence." Then he goes on to name the individuals: "Mananiya MLA Mahodaya, Sri Dulip Pattnaik Sir, his distinguished friend Chandrakishore Babu, and our police in-charge Amrish Rashmi Babu..." Like a flash of scare it hits me. That name Chandrakishore makes me start and goosebumps cloak me at the speed of lightning. It's like someone flashed a light on a snake whose presence you were unaware of.

The man has a refined taste. In an ash-colored safari suit, boots of rosewood color, gold-rimmed spectacles, and matching socks and handkerchief, he leaves the rest of the crowd a galaxy behind in fashion. He's tall, gaunt-faced, and with an Adam's apple the size of a lychee. When he smiles, his past habit becomes evident all over his teeth like the tablets of Harappa and Mohenjodhar. He must have been an avid tobacco chewer at one point. If he has traded the habit for a vogue lifestyle, then the only question is at whose expense. His presence riles me up further.

The director goes on to thank Mantu for his hospitality, and in the same breath he extends reverence and gratitude to Mother. All the ass licking later, he introduces the

premise of the play, his actors, and the drama group. Finally, he signs off with the remark that “the spectators may kindly turn a generous eye for any lapse or gaffe in our performance.” Ha! I almost choke on laughter, and a nearby banar flinch as if hit by a pellet.

I occupy a seat in the third row by the isle to make my exit swift. I gauge the distance between myself and the entry ramp. Eight or ten feet at the most. Compared to the periphery...the deluge of numbers begins. In the dark backdrop of the crowd, where I should see silhouettes, I now see numbers as bright as neon signs. I immediately look away.

The first scene of the play shows the demon Raktabija immersed in epic meditation. The entry music ceases and in its place reverberates the stentorian voice of the actor: “Om Nama Sivaya,” he chants. After years of austere and uninterrupted devotion, Raktabija finally wins Lord Shiva’s attention, who now enters the stage in such nondescript contrast that you have to instantly feel pity for the man. With his fake snake, collarbone sticking out and jaundiced skin tone, you know that this actor has to be the pariah in the drama troupe, gleaned non-consequential roles that nobody wants to play. A minor conversation later, Mr. Bholanath, the lord of the fools, doing justice to his name grants Raktabija the boon that renders him immortal and initiates his launch into the demonic stardom. Exit Baba Shambhunath, and follows the evil, echoing laughter of Raktabija. “This is what I’ve been waiting for, ha ha!” he says. “Decades of tapasya has culminated in a boon that will protect my long held ambition. Havoc will be unleashed now! Blood will flow! Ha ha ha!” He raises his hands above his head. “Who is there to stop me now? Step up if you’re man enough.”

He delivers the challenge four times facing the crowd on each side of the stage, and lingering an extra bit on the MLA's side, who gives the performance an approving nod. But I, on the other hand, have every reason to be hopeful. The difference in the lead actor's pre-play confidence and the current persona starkly manifests. The crowd may not spot his ambiguous state of mind past the veneer of music, loud dialogue, and sensational lines, but I can tune into his distress like a radio latching on to a frequency.

Father always sneers at these plays when I recount the details to him the next day. He'll look up from his book, shaking his head, to remark upon the false mythology these people are peddling. "Will they ever read the scriptures? Will they even care to consult an expert? They've conveniently repurposed everything to fit their propaganda." We'll always disagree though on the remedial action to be taken. While I'll demand for stopping these plays altogether, Father will favor making them sincere and accurate. It amazes me how he can make concessions to these plays, when he's averse to entertainment in general. In the past, when Kuna and I asked him for money to go to the movies, he would point at the rack of his Oriya and English poetry collection and say, "Herein lies all the recreation that you need." Why then he couldn't take Mother and Mantu by their ears, drag them to his office, and rub the books on their faces?

Raktabija orders the beheading of a teenage boy because he's caught stealing flowers from his orchid garden. As the stealer presents his desperate situation in a dovish manner, more along the lines of "meri andhi behan and bidhva ma," the demon king brandishes his cruelty by grabbing the boy's neck and flinging him to the floor and ordering his sentries to take him away for execution. Then comes the dance routine of the courtesans, who the demon admires in his Shakti Kapoor style pose as the libation is

poured into his glass. The unsteadiness of his grip tells me that the actor's mind is preoccupied.

While the nubile girls execute the dance master's tak thei routine to perfection, the ringleader of perversity sits there carrying not a hot missile in his kaccha but a pair of sweating balls. Few boys in the crowd burst into dance, thrusting and slashing their lanky limbs in air. Few even raise their shirt collars up and are about to tie handkerchiefs around their necks when they're stopped by the kill-joy banars.

"This's not a cinema hall!" they shout.

Raktabija's crowning barbarity, which will reverse his fate, comes next. In an act of defiance when Raktabija forces two brahmin mendicants to eat meat, the thunder god speaks in the sky. The brahmins howl a curse. One escapes and another gets killed.

Exit Raktabija and the scene moves to the heaven, where the escaped brahmin reports to the gods of how the demon has crossed the lakshman-rekha. That's it for him. He must die now. The celestial army is summoned and the task of leading the war against such hotheaded, ferocious and omnipotent demon is given to Chandika, the lead actress, who when enters the stage with the cacophony of cymbal, conch shell, and mridang cacophony, I let out a cry: "Illo Ma lo!" The nearby banar gives me a blazing eye. That woman drips beauty. In full goddess regalia now, she fashions a red sari and blouse. Beads of sweat gather at the bottom of her neck. And the kohl beneath her eyes accentuates the fairness of her face. I listen to her lines of teaching Raktabija a lesson and watch the slope of her chest rise and fall as soft as feathered cushion.

Like a haveli hitting me, I sense Chandrakanta's darting gaze upon me from across the stage. Through the swishing costumes of the gods and goddesses, and their

cumbersome paraphernalia our eyes try to communicate. “Curse you, Cheeku! Curse you!” she seems to be saying.

At the very back of the ramp they’re saddling the lead actor with the fake blood pouch. And he seems to be in an argument with the director. This is the perfect time for him to say that this play is a trap and he’s going to walk out. And then no one can save the play this late. The culminating scene of the play will be memorialized as “Demon runs away with the show.”

Nothing happens though.

Like a habituated dog he returns to the stage taping together his frazzled nerves. In the final scene, the war wages, not too strikingly of course, for it’s impossible to fit as many actors within the small stage without resulting in a claustrophobic hodgepodge. Die there a mini-demon. Die there a mini-god. Few deaths and exits later, only Raktabija and Chandika are left behind on the stage. I get ready. Chandika tries to kill Raktabija in all sorts of way, but the demon falls on the ground only to bounce back with booming laughter. Of course, that’s his boon. Chandika realizes she has to resort to some drastic measure and she declares that she’ll lap up each drop of Raktabija’s blood before it hits the ground. Saying so she extends her tongue and the light goes out.

You realize how powerful those stage lights are when they’re cut off so instantaneously. It’s like someone cut the circuit of the sun. The entire fairground is dark now. And with no time to acquaint my eyes, I feel my way toward the ramp. Both of its sides are cordoned by hardcore devotees and banars to make Mother’s entry to the stage smooth. There are layers of curious audience members through whom I move forcibly. When I receive a pushback I know that I have hit the cordon. Slowly my eyes are getting

used to the darkness. I spot Mother, rocking and bumbling her way through the entryway. I execute my last option to sabotage the play. I grab the trident Mother is carrying and snatch it away from her in a swift arc. And I let it sail with all my might over the crowd's head. It might not have travelled as far as a godless island, but the commotion it unleashes is precious.

I weather a couple of blows, but I deliver back a few too, rightfully and at the right places. A banar rolls on the floor grabbing his groin. I hear Mantu's cry to switch the lights on. Another mamatkar, however, assures him that they can find the trident if they search. Through all this rises the maddening shriek of Mother. Her pitch is so sharp that it's like a cave woman's cry boring its way through history and time. Thumping her feet and writhing her plump body she unleashes a thunderous hulustul that no man in his right mind will go near to.

When the light comes back, Mother is the only one standing on the stage, without the trident. Her tongue is red (how, I don't know), sticking out, and eyes resembling blood moon. Her body puffs and deflates as if she were swallowing air instead of breathing it. "Where is he?" she bellows. "Tell him, his death has come to meet him."

He's gone missing of course. Mother's howl must have shot the last bit of his composure into smithereens. But the debacle of the play doesn't bring titter or scoffing from the audience. Instead, around me I find complete silence and faces overcast in misgiving.

"Shakti! Am the incarnation of Shakti!" She emits more shrieks. When she starts beating her chest, Mantu moves closer to the stage with his hands outstretched as if she were going to collapse any moment. "He'll be wiped out! Where has he run off to? To the

sea? That fool! He doesn't know that the sea is coming after him. So is the wind and thousands of ghosts. He thinks a woman can't challenge him!"

It must be the worst day for the demon actor, for currently he's produced like a prisoner by the constables and a squad of banars. The expression on his face is that of a man being dragged to the gallows.

Mother leaps at him with such alacrity that the constables and banars scamper. But the actor, not so easily. She grabs him by the scruff of his neck and shoves him ahead of her with effortless ease. When she doesn't drag him back to the stage but away from it, the panic strikes the audience. Where is she taking him? Where is she going? MLA, his coterie and Mantu lead the crowd, but Mother is pulling away from the rest of us as if she were riding a sled. At the south side of the temple, detached from the temple's premise, is the slaughter chamber. Next to it the trench has been dug for the fire walk. The charcoal inside the trench must have been set alight very recently. The ravenous flames are yet to settle into sleepy embers. But like a moth being invited by fire, she makes a run for it with the actor, whose cries for forgiveness is the only sound resonating the night.

The preparer of the fire warns at the top of his voice: "Ma, the fire is too hot! It will scald you!" Mantu is the most frantic: "Bou? Bou?" he cries out. "Water! Bring buckets of water!"

The awful begging of the actor as he's propelled toward the fire is the most chilling thing. But suddenly as they are about to step right into the trench she flings him aside, and jumps into it all by herself. The women devotees wail that her sari will catch fire. Like a matal elephant she runs on the firebed, splitting the flames. As she reaches the end, she turns around and makes another run. Like an abacus bead she bounces from one

end to another; yet, the fire doesn't engulf her. Instead, it tames down, coughing and sputtering to lifeless ash. In her face, I see no sign of pain but only fatigue. After several rounds, she stumbles to the side of the trench and collapses like an empty sack. Mantu and banars rush to wrap her feet in wet gamchhas. In a metal stretcher they scoop her up and carry her toward the temple, where she'll be left by herself until morning.

Beside me, a grandfatherly man asks a child in his care: "Wasn't it better than the last year?"

CHAPTER V
A FLOWER NAMED FALL

2nd March, 1999

“Passion is heat, Cheeku, ton of heat. Not being watchful means it will combust you. Top class inferno. Why do you think men wear condom? If not, then it will char you. Joules is the one who predicted it. If not, then why did he come up with the equation?”

Shut up! I say to him. Or I will punch you.

“Joule’s law, students. One of the fundamental laws of electricity. Write as I write on the blackboard. Heat is proportional to square times innocence. Heat is proportional to resistance. Heat is proportional to temptation. So if the amount of heat is to be controlled then the three factors need to be balanced. Otherwise, you’ll end up with a melted wire. Ha, a melted wire! But it was a different equation in my pocket when we walked out of the party. I was trying to convert the higher order differential equations to the first order differentials, popping in and out the paper slip from my pocket at the party discreetly. I thought no one saw it. But she did! She didn’t stop asking about it, pressing her body against me. Is that why they call you Monk? Is that why? Can’t you even spare a minute for fun? We walked side by side. I had the belch of cheese in my mouth and she had the breath of wine. I didn’t know what she was doing by me. I didn’t know. I thought she mistook me. At the party she walked up to me and said, I saw you. Doing what, I said.

She tapped my breast pocket with her chulbuli finger and said, that is adorable...we were out, walking, she in her girlish frock, flowers all over it, and her x-rated thighs rubbing against each other, openly, and the curves of her bigoobs peaking out. She asked again, won't you show it to me?"

Shut up, will you? Don't make me switch on the lights. If I get up from the bed, then I'll do things to you, I swear, so vile that even Mother won't recognize her wonder child.

"I felt the sunset sky. Be it above the downtown or over our sea, painted in peaches and nectarines, ripe it was. A leaf floated in and landed ahead of us. She picked it up and said, the fall is upon us. And I asked myself why don't we have fall here, Cheeku. Why not? Why no change in color? Why no death dance of the leaves? Why things so same here? I reeked of Mother and Mamun's caution. While my roommates reeked of cumin and ginger, I reeked of thousand gigaozm. She asked me, never touched alcohol and never touched meat? What else haven't you touched? Her giggle was like coconut water. Makes you thirsty as you drink it. She stopped by a flowerbed of tickseed and romancing them with open arms, half-stooping and half-leaning, she said, come here. Just touch them. And tell me that you don't want them. That the end of summer doesn't torture you the way it does these flowers. I did, and she said laughing, not these flowers, but these. Cheeku, the law of the universe tells us that the charge is always the same; it can neither be created nor destroyed. Subtract and divide it from Cockshutshire and see it multiply in Juicypur. The charge that leaks through the wine-soaked eyes and loose neck line reappears somewhere else. She asked, what type of admirer are you? Will you take these flowers and put them by your bed or will you leave them alone here? Let them be, I

said. She sighed: why would you choose that? Why would you make me feel bad? Slow please, slow. I want to enjoy this walk.”

I drift on and off sleep, waking up to the jabber mill at work. I can hear him fold and unfold the map in the darkness. The rest of the house conveniently sleeps while I put up with the drivel of this mega sleaze. I have complained to Mother many times to move him off my room, but she would lament that this was Kuna’s room before he left for America, and this was the room he naturally took to when he returned. So moving him would lead to more demented and uncontrolled behavior. But that’s only an excuse. Her ultimate motive is to see me tortured by his nightly porncast. The news of Kuna’s removal from school did not come from him, but it came from one of his roommates, who called to inform us that he had been missing since four days. None of the roommates were even aware of his absence since his behavior was so erratic lately. First he had stopped attending classes. Then he stopped paying the rent. When one of his roommates confronted him about his slothfulness, the scuffle resulted in a call to the police. The school tried to contact him for the pending dues and the lack of attendance, but nothing could draw him out of the miasma he submarined those days. Walking became his favorite pastime. Winter or rain he just walked. The door would slam open at three in the morning and our glorious goodbuck would enter with a film of snow on his eyebrows and his lips swollen like snap peas. He shocked the sense out of his roommates. His walking turned into a stalking marathon, when he started barging into classes, hostels, meetings, and auditoriums in search of the gori. The university expelled him and issued a restraining order against him; thus, the King Psycho was handed a one-way ticket home.

“I didn’t switch on the lights. I didn’t! We entered the house stealthily and I didn’t want anyone else to know. Tell me, she whispered, will you be mad at me if I tell you that I’m not a sea person? I’ve never built sand castles. Fuck, I don’t even like the sand touching my skin. Will you find me too rude? She smelt bright as the flowers on her dress...as if they were waiting for the darkness to blossom. The sea has cast a very wide net in my mind, I told her. I miss every drop of it. She asked, what do you miss the most? The breeze, the sand, the sun? I said, the way the sea feels on the naked feet. You’re such a romantic, Monk. Tell me more about this town of yours. Show it to me. She spread her arms out like wings and asked me to imagine her as the map of India and mark the town with my hand. That’s how I came to touch her waist...the shrine was still there, Cheeku. Above my study table, there on the shelf, it was still there, the photos of Mother, the goddess, the box of tabeej for my protection, and the stub of the incense stick that I had burned that morning. We were right in front of it, facing each other in darkness, my geographer’s hand on the map of her, her breathing no longer playful; yet, I feared the shrine would light up any moment and the glossy faces would come alive. So I took my pants off and threw it at the shelf, aiming to hide the shrine. A tremor by the wall, and she said—no splintering of the glass first—and she said, ooohh, Mr. Monk is getting wild.”

You sure she didn’t say MONKEY? I yell out. With his long beard these days and the hair like a bird’s nest, he can make a temple langur look superior in hygiene. He always had a studious mind inside a powerful and vigorous body. It’s a surprise that he never interested himself in anything seriously athletic; instead, as the looniness gradually blunted his intelligence his physical strength emerged as his foremost trait. Often people have commented that among the three of us, Kuna and I carry the discernible

resemblance as brothers. They base their observation solely upon our eyes. Otherwise, we two contrast significantly: he's burly, and I am slender. His skin tone is darker like Father's, while I am paler like Mother.

When he arrived at the airport, the crown jewel returning home after nineteen months, the reunion was not your usual happy melodrama. Mother and Father were already in a tizzy after learning about the entire backstory from the roommate who called. Before a drastic conclusion was drawn about his absence, he was found on his way to an excavation site at the heart of America with the archaeological map in his hand. He was returned home but not before a racket he caused about his deportation. He suffered a nervous breakdown, stayed at the hospital, and was then escorted back to India in the care of the flight attendants who must have viewed him as "Fragile item. Handle with care." At the airport he didn't drop any hint of emotion while there was much crying and wailing around him. He kept looking past us with his mouth agape as if some exquisite dinner was about to drop from the distant sky.

"I can teach you, she said. Sixty percent lips. Thirty percent tongue. Ten percent bite. She pulled my face closer to her, and sixty-thirty-ten I counted as the dam of saliva burst open in my mouth. The warmth of her petals would have melted an icy planet and I feared of the pants slipping off the photo frames and Mother calling me and Mamun knocking at the door to remind me of the promises..."

Mamun, yes, that rotten seed. Being Mother's brother and a migrant to Canada long back for his own higher degree, he was the one who Mother called after hearing about Kuna's debacle. But he washed his hands of the affair entirely, forgetting that he was the prime sutradhar who mediated Kuna's study abroad plan in the first place. Oh

yes, he arrived with his mustache dyed and tipped with rosewater upon hearing the news that his most promising nephew had won a scholarship to study master's in electrical engineering in US. At that time the usual drama was unfolding at the house: Mother was stupefied to learn that Kuna had submitted an application without her knowledge. She vowed that no son of hers was ever going to set foot in that land of depravity; Father, on the other hand, stood aside happy but weathering Mother's accusations of poisoning her children's minds. Mamun landed amidst this with his suave reasoning that resisting the temptations of white women is a matter of self-control and rectitude. (Like he did, of course, when he made his wife wear a bikini in secret.) So the solution was simple: Kuna will make a solemn promise not to touch women, meat, or liquor, thus replicating the twentieth century version of Gandhi's vows to his Mother. Kuna did, and Mother came around slowly after a ton of drama as is her habit. She agreed to finance all the expenses that the scholarship would not cover as long as Kuna promised to call her regularly and write a monthly letter giving a truthful account of his life there. But when the letters stopped arriving and the phone calls became scarce Mother didn't notice anything amiss; she was busy with MLA Khalnaik's reelection bid in those days. Nevertheless, it was Father who became the target of Mother's fire, as the original instigator of Kuna's journey abroad.

“I was cold in my undies. In spite of the windows being shut, I was cold. I was thinking where had all the heat gone? I square R T. Where had it disappeared? To the aid of memory, Cheeku. That's where all the energy had travelled, the electromagnetic waves, to illuminate the racks and cabinets where the details would be stored for the future. Like a giant wheel at the fairground, memory sucks all the power on to itself for

its slow spin and unfailing recording of the plump squeals of innocence. No words passed between us now. Yet, the room swelled in twin echoes. My hand fumbled like a school of fish in the search of light insider her perfumed ringlets, my lips and fingertips full of moaning nipples, and I horned hard. No longer thinking of the promises or the flower that I should have left behind. Why should I? You are scared of the waves, Cheeku. You won't even go near them. So you won't understand what I am talking about. The waves of passion are no child's play. It's not enough to wet your feet in them. You must dive into them...Gently she pressed down my shoulders, making me kneel before her as she rolled her pantie down. My hands, she wrapped around her ass. I knew right away what I had to do...Shit! she whimpered. I remember her clutching the back of my head so hard; yet, I didn't feel any pain."

So speaks the wizard of kamasutra. One night of bia licking and he thinks himself as the lord of dhis-dhas, disparaging me as incapable of understanding passion. Why, you have to ask, why a stray night of lust should mangle a man so badly? Why couldn't he stop harping about it, recounting the night's details obsessively, correcting the sequence of events, and mimicking the voice and accent of the gori for her part of their conversation? He doesn't sound anything like them though. Those Americans, I mean. I have heard them on TV and in their blue films to know that Kuna is every bit a phony as the blood runs in this family. And his mixedupness is not just contained to voice and accent. The other day I heard him say "Dudhalogy"; yes, of all the rotten mélange that passes his tongue, he couples the words "Dudha" and "logy." That's the level of malfunctionality we're talking of here, where he can't separate languages like a baby between shit and food.

Father, out of his self-stirred guilt, justifies Kuna's obsession: "Your brother has always been too sensitive, Cheeku. It was my mistake that I didn't anticipate how his tender personality could get mauled in a foreign land. When his letters started arriving from America, they were so brief. No excitement about how different, big, or glittering things were there compared to here as every young man relishes. On the phone too he was no different. I thought maybe his natural bookish nature was making him stay focused on his studies; but no, they were the sure signs of solitude. I should have known better. When the house was remodeled and separate rooms were built for three of you, Kuna chose to share the room with you. Why? He could not be detached from the family for long. So naturally, he was seeking love and comfort in this woman who had rather a twisted design. You see, it all could be explained by psychology. And it's not some spell by a witch as your Mother likes to believe. A man's fragile constitution comes from his surrounding and upbringing, which in your brother's case is caused by uncompromising sanctimoniousness. How long could he have lasted in that materialistic country without succumbing to temptation? It was only a matter of time."

"I was naked and cold. She took my ingy into her hands. On her toes now, chin arched up, lips densely into mine. Nobody had knocked at the door yet, but then I would not have stopped either. That's Joule's Law for you. After a critical point, you can't stop the heat. We moved toward the bed. No wait, she reached out for her purse that she had dropped on the floor. She fished out a packet from it and slipped it into my hand. What's this? I asked. She said, your innocence kills me, Monk..."

I am not surprised that Kuna is sensitive. The man, who is putting on display his manhood right now, is actually as soft as a lychee inside. From an early age Kuna wanted

to be an electrical engineer. And that determination came to him not because of a role model, but out of an incidental fact of receiving an electric shock one day. Mother was just getting popular for her “healing touch” in those days, and to prepare the stage for her evening session a tent party was at work. A young apprentice who could not reach to a hanging lamp socket found Kuna handy. He mounted him upon his shoulder and handed him a bulb. I watched Kuna struggle in the receding dusk light. When his hand slipped and landed into the socket, I watched their compound figure jump and reel as if a tall paper mache doll was about to tip over. “Did you get a shock?” asked another handyman. The two heads, one above the other, nodded simultaneously. Kuna never forgot the experience though. He searched through Father’s books and the school library for more information. When his search turned futile, he arrived at the local bookstore curious about any book on electricity. The shopkeeper said that the books in engineering were a good source but they would be of no use for a school student like him. Kuna was so stubborn that he convinced the shopkeeper to order the book from Cuttack and threw a racket at home for money. A week after he got the book, Kuna declared at the dinner table one night that he would grow up to be an electrical engineer. You can notice the same degree of obsession in that map that he brought as a souvenir from America. It’s impressive how his wooly mind has never misplaced the map. Every night, once he is ready for the bed and the lights are switched off, he takes the map out from under the pillow. You can hear the glossy paper unfolding, and in the morning he replaces the map before leaving the bed. Quite extraordinary this routine is, in its precision and faithfulness, when compared to the ruin that is this man’s life. In the daytime, when he’s

found studying the map you can see in his face a degree of attentiveness and calculation that must have been the hallmark of Columbus before discovering America.

“A wrinkled, drained charge I am atop her, blood lashing heavily in the fundom, and beads of her nectarine in my mind. My entire body weight was carried by her at this point. That’s the generosity of women, Cheeku, letting a man be feather light upon them through the biology’s own fuckmosis. The bed and the walls still reverberated. If I would have cut them open then her moaning would have spilled out as sinusoidal waves that we created earlier...She asked, You don’t care what your friends say about you? When they mentioned you, I tried to picture you in my head. I shouldn’t have been at the party you know, but I couldn’t help finding out why these jerks are making fun of you. I said, we are not friends. By attending one’s party, you don’t become their friend. She said, but don’t let them tease you as Monk. You’re not one anymore. She traced with her finger the edge of my lips. I said, I won’t stop taking my equations to the party. She said, I have my own equations you know and that makes two of us. I decipher old scripts, very old, that are left behind on seals and tablets. There’s nothing sadder than stumbling upon an old civilization and discovering messages that were never written for you. Just like the Indus civilization. Four hundred and nineteen signs in total but not a single one has been cracked yet. The script was so isolated that it never interacted with any other. Isn’t that sad? I said, then you should come with me to my town. There are many ancient things there that need deciphering, and when you get tired you can lounge at the beach. The sand won’t even bother you. She took my hand and put it upon her neck, closing her eyes. She said, I wish we had not met this way ... Like what way? ... Please, switch on the lights. I want to be able to see you when I wake up at night. I got up from the bed naked

and switched on the table lamp. Herself naked too except for a corner of the blanket covering her crotch, petal soft legs sticking out, her big toes leaning against one another. But I was no longer afraid of Mother watching me. My pants were dangling from the shelf; all the photo frames have either crashed or laid flat except for Mother's. But I was no longer shy. I returned to the bed and tucked in by her, facing her, but she had already drifted to sleep. I wondered where to put my hand, her shoulder, waist, or thigh..."

I have a specific thought on nights like these. Needle and thread, and I will sew his mouth forever. The nightlives of the insects can return then. The nocturnal birds who must have flocked to Siberia to die of shame can return to their natural habitats. I emerge from the mosquito net to head to the kitchen to make some lemon squash that will cool me off. Once again the looney has chased away my sleep. One time I threw cold water at him at the height of the winter. But he still kept his blabberphone turning through convulsion and chatter. His mind is like that unstoppable engine from the movie *The Burning Train*. Once it sets off, there's no stopping it!

When I open the door of my room to step out, the first thing that bothers me is the darkness. Usually, the bulb outside the storeroom downstairs is left lit through the night. Has it got fused? I cross the corridor to peep over the balustrade. I see the profile of a man sitting at the edge of the verandah and leaning heavily against the granite column; either a handkerchief is sticking out of his hand or something more solid. Quite an artistic repose he might have struck had the moonlight been upon him. I scan either side of me. All the upstairs bedrooms are dark and shut. Mother's bedroom may have been locked from the outside. Its key only remains with her and Mantu. I look closely again at the man. Is he someone I know? As he moves a bit, I see behind him the light of the sitting

room leaking through the door crack. Who can be visiting Mother at this hour? Why is she in a closed door meeting?

Father prefers to sleep early, because he's an early riser and the morning light will invariably find him in his office with his morning cup of tea alongside the open volumes of Kent's Repertory as he waits for the daily newspapers (four in total) to be delivered. So he never approves of the late night rendezvous. One time he used the word "charitra" to relay his displeasure to Mother. She locked herself in her room for three days, abstaining from food, and when Father tried to intervene, she threw a cane reed at him, prodding him to flog her if he wasn't satisfied punishing her yet.

I decide to postpone the squash. The kitchen is downstairs and in the opposite flank of the house from the sitting room. There's something about this man that tells me he's watchful in spite of his relaxed manner. Going to the kitchen won't surely harm me, but it won't tell me who the visitor is. So I sneak to the roof. The set of stairs on the north side of the house is the farthest from the man. So I head in that direction, staying away from the balustrade and treading steps like a crane. The key to the roof door needs to be retrieved first which hides above the electric junction box to deny Kuna access to the roof. I collect the key without any metal chime or ring, and I tiptoe up the stairs. The roof door was freshly greased, so it opens moan-free. First thing I do when I get to the roof is spy over the parapet. In the pathway of the front garden, I see three vehicles standing in line. The first one is Amrish Puri's jeep with the vile lalbati atop it, followed by MLA Khalnaik's Ambassador. But the third one is a surprise, and the sleekest of the three. Stretched like a ship in the front and the back, its windshield curves like an idli and the wheel hubs radiate shiny steel. It is the incarnation of "luxury car" that I have seen on

TV. Its white color is tantalizing when the distant streetlight washes over it. The three men congregating near the cars can be assigned to their respective vehicles: the uniformed man is Amrish Puri's driver/constable, the MLA's driver is in his casual clothes, and the third man is in pressed white uniform just like you see in the movies. The only piece of apparel missing on him is a visor-studded cap, which I bet is sitting in the vehicle. Who is this wealthy nawab escorted to Mother's court? It's not unusual for rich men to visit her. They are as superstitious and gullible as the poor folks. The only difference is that the affluent devotees receive deluxe attention and custom-made rituals in return of their weighty donations. But even none of them can expect to be received so late.

Between this high profile entourage and the man outside the sitting room, who clearly has a watchdog role, I sense collusion. I plan my descent to the ground using the neem tree by the puja room. The extending branches of the tree caress the eastern face of the house, easily an invitation for the thieves to get easy access to the roof. But this is Devaki Devi's house, as Mother boasts. "No thief in his right mind will ever come near the periphery of my house." So far that has held true. Doors and windows are shut in this house for wind and snakes, not for crooks or thugs.

I descend with one step on the parapet ledge, and next upon the window extension. All I have between myself and the tree trunk is the thinning cluster of twigs that may not support my weight. I take my chance in the blindness of the night. Through a careful balancing act and trusting the hardness of the twigs, I find a footing on the big bough. One, two, and three...I jump and land on the ground spry as gibbon. I walk close to the wall of the house toward the back. The dining room's windows are open. On the

floor of this room Sulekha sleeps, bundled in her wicker mat and quilt and perpetually smelling of carom seeds. I expect to hear her snore. Instead, as I am shuffling past the window, I hear from the room: “Bhari...bharriiii!” I freeze. Her voice is so lucid it seems to be directed at me. “Pachis foot, pachis foot bhari!”

You fool, scaring me like that! I mutter. Let twenty-five feet be the height from which you jump and die. I continue by the wall to the end of the kitchen. Before turning, I throw a cautionary glance to ensure that the back compound is not guarded. The windows of the sitting room open to the back and the west side of the house. Surprisingly, the back-facing windows are shut and as I trot the width of the house and check the other side, I find windows on that side shut too. I press my ears upon the windows to listen. All I hear is the beating of my heart and for a moment the entire activity seems pointless. But slowly, the voices emerge like the fizz of soda escaping entrapment.

“...hundred fifty tonne in twenty-four hours...water quality...besides...seven thousand square feet...”

I fear the surge of numbers again. I shake my head to unclog my mind.

“Is that a lot?” That’s mother asking.

“One tonne is thousand kilogram. So you can imagine...”

“Bap re! And it’s ready you’re saying.”

“The machines are about to be transported from Gujarat, and then the installation personnel...two more months you can say.”

“Nahi nahi, I’m feeling a bit odd. Besides it’s the job of Dulip Babu to cut ribbons. He’s in the business of inaugurating things. Why don’t you ask him instead?”

“Uh ho, I’ll be there, won’t I?” speaks the MLA. His voice is the most distinct and loudest in the group. “But I and you are not the same. This is becoming like Assembly. I have to repeat myself. You’re the divinity that we all look up to. The other day an Assembly man from Phulbani asked about you. That’s how far your popularity has reached. So only your blessing can ensure that this factory will never fail. Everyone in this town and far will patronize it and the authorities will keep their hands off it. Sherbet will come from one end and prasad from the other.” He laughs as he finishes.

“But won’t there be defilement? I am a strict vegetarian as you know. Even if I live in a coastal town, no fish has ever entered my house.”

“The assembly line will be designed in such a way that...” The same stranger speaks, who catalogued the numbers. His manner sounds refined and surefooted. No residue of paan or gutkha seems to be inflecting his speech. Most likely the sleek car belongs to him. “You can see when you come...two tonnes of flake ice will be specially reserved for the healing sherbet in a separate area.”

“You wanted to open a dharmasala at Puri, isn’t it? This will be the stepping stone to that. The money that will be made from selling the sherbet will be like a windfall. Who won’t want a drink blessed by Ma Tara and you? With the summer upon us we can even start selling ice cream and squash. I, for my part, will introduce the scheme of subsidized ice for the people under the banner of my party. People can be saved from sunstroke. Vegetable wholesalers can preserve their produce. And the fishermen will benefit too. Such conveniences will win me popular support and help me get the MP ticket if nothing else.”

“You’ll get the ticket. That’s my promise. I’m working on it, didn’t I say so? Your party’s boss will look at you favorably this time and you’ll be promoted as you say, ‘from state capital to the national capital.’”

“Ma, let your blessing be upon me always.” MLA Khalnaik always addresses Mother as Ma, perhaps having swapped his own mother for a maid. Mother once titled him as “her eldest son.” I wonder if Mantu is also part of this meeting. “You know without your sanction I never would have won the MLA seat the first time. I’m indebted to your vidya and maya. That’s why I brought Chandra Babu to you when he asked me for help with the ice factory.” I recollect the whole business of ice factory now, which is touted in the newspaper as the “savior in the region.” The fact that in the thirty kilometer stretch of the coastline there’s not a single ice factory had become quite an issue. So when the news came that a private company, whose name I cannot remember, had decided to open a “high capacity” and “highly modern” ice plant in Jagsama, a town seven kilometer south of ours, there was much celebration. Shama and other nolias got drunk one night in triumph and hosted a feast, because ice would allow them to go deep sea fishing and send their catch to a far-off wholesale market without worrying about spoiling the goods. “So sprinkle his destiny with stars as you did to mine. You’re coming to inaugurate his factory. That’s pukka. This factory will be the ticket to our success. With the current political climate, the central government may topple any day. So we need to get ready.”

“Consider the factory to be at your service. I assure you that the factory will run to full capacity and considering how the entire region does not have an ice making plant this will only...”

“Indeed! Water will be supplied at a subsidized rate. I will lobby for waving the power tariff too. Govt. these days is having many welfare schemes for fishermen. As long as Chandra Babu can help me with the subsidized ice, then my scheme can take off too.”

“Sure, as long as your party can bear the expense of it.” Rich laughter is shared by the two. I am sure if they’re sitting side by side then their hands are probably slapping together in air like two longotiya yaars. Next thing you hear is they’re calling each other “Chandu” and “Duli.”

“But tell me,” Mother intervenes, “why not by land or rail? You could sneak those things across the border easily I always thought.”

“Not in the present climate...” Chandra Babu responds to Mother’s question. “Land route is easy but then you get trapped at the border or port. Too much surveillance these days. Even after paying the guards high commission there’s still no guarantee of getting the cargo through. At least in this way we can bypass all the bureaucratic hassles. But the real question is will there be enough fishermen to take the prasad?”

“There you go! Now, you’re speaking my tongue!”

“I have no control over them,” Mother says. “Moreover, after evicting them from their old place many consider me as their enemy.”

“Uh ho, you’re doubting yourself again. No one in their right mind would take you on. Moreover, this will be between Chandra Babu and the fishermen. Money is such a bait that no nolia can resist to bite. And if they ever come close to blackmailing Chandra Babu then they will have to remember that they’re raising finger against one of your friends. Will they ever dare to mess with your reputation and your devotees?”

“That difficulty...” Amrish Puri speaks for the first time. But his voice is so muffled that even burying my ear into the window won’t help. Already a soft-spoken person, his pitch has sunk to the reverence of a newly-wed bride in the presence of three big heads. I hear “trawlers” and “coast guards,” but it is hard to connect with the jumble of fragments stacking in my mind.

“What about the workers in your factory?” Mother asks.

“Hardly any one of them will be local. They’ll be skillful in what they do, and my confidants will be in charge of bringing the raw material. Plus, we’ll add baking soda to water to make the ice cloudy and opaque.”

“I told Chandra Babu to start an aquaculture farm,” the MLA speaks. “I’ll invest and deal with the regulations too I told him. But he’s super ambitious. He wants to get rich quickly. That’s good though. At least I’ll have less competition when I start my own prawn business. I and my family are tired of being away from the coast. Ten more years in politics and I am retiring...”

“All talk.”

“Oh, you’ll see. After I bag the Ministry of Fisheries I’ll retire.” More hilarity.

“So it’s set then. If everything goes smoothly, the factory will be successfully operating in two months and it’ll kill three birds at a time. That will be quite a shikar.”

The door opens as Khalnaik winds down a hiccupy laugh. I gingerly traverse back, clinging close to the wall, and when I get to the neem tree I flatten my frame against the trunk. Slowly the group emerges. Khalnaik bids farewell by touching Mother’s feet, followed by Amrish Puri. It’s hard to distinguish the man Chandra Babu in the group. He moves briskly behind the cars, as the night’s shadow favors to keep him

inconspicuous. He's tall is all I can tell. The backdoor of his car is held open for him and he slips like an eel into murky water. The man who was outside the sitting room takes position in the front seat. A secretary? But his manner tells me he's more like a bodyguard. Why does Chandra Babu need a bodyguard? Not until the driver jumps in and the car starts moving, I realize that the car is driven from the wrong side. I wait for Mother to step back into the house. I climb up the tree and lunge for the roof. Heart in my mouth and muscles fully stretched, I land upon the roof safe. It'll take Mother some time before she comes upstairs to her room. So without rushing I lock the roof door and return to my room and bed.

Kuna has fallen asleep. But he'll wake up at some point. As if rising from stupor, he'll resume his porn mill. I hear footsteps outside the door. It's Mother; her silhouette takes the center of the doorframe. In my absent mindedness, I forgot to close the door behind me. She lingers there a bit, as if she were watching us. Finally, swinging the door close, she leaves.

I try to shake off the uneasy feeling that is sprouting all over me. The details hit my mind like pebbles striking a clay pot. A notch of extra force and the pot will collapse altogether. Of the three targets that Khalnaik was talking of, I can perceive only two: one of his and another of Mother's. MLA wants to take credit for the ice plant, and for bringing prosperity and relief to his constituents. This is like his progress report that he can show off to his party bosses and constituents to persuade them for a successful candidacy as an MP. And the scheme of giving away cheap ice is a populist stunt that politicians like him cannot forgo. For Mother, the prospects of making money and expanding her empire are as addictive as saccharine for ants. She won't stop even with

the dharmasala at Puri or gold temple at the top of Himalayas. But what's the target for Chandra Babu? This ice plant will clearly serve as a decoy for some underhanded business of his? But then what is it? Why is he trying to shield his plant by buying Mother's and the MLA's influences? And what is prasad? "Sherbet will come from one end and prasad from another"? The euphemism that the words serve cannot refer to something consecrated; otherwise, Mother would not have objected about defilement? There are many fishes that the government rations or bars from catching. But then why will Chandra Babu, this conman, deal with fishes in his ice plant? And there is the mention of fishermen, who will be baited to freight the prasad into the sea?

I can ask Shama about the ice plant and his owner. I can ask him if he or any other fisherman was approached by anyone. He might know about "prasad" or the illegal fishes that could be proving lucrative lately. But then how can I bring these questions before him without giving away that Mother has joined a smuggling racket? What's next? A visit from the vigilance bureau or CBI? Handcuffs and a solemn parade to the police station? Father is the only person I can confide in. But he will most likely dismiss my accusation.

The ill-feeling makes a comeback and mounts upon me, making it hard for me to breathe. I feel the detonation of anger. Like a nuclear cloud it billows and mushrooms. Of all the rotten things that woman has done in her life to uproot this family, this will eclipse them all. Like a movie plot it unfolds. Smuggling den, villains, vamps. Bilious swaths of criminals and lowlives that parade in the movies have come to roost under this roof. Disgrace is about to be the last name of this family.

"Joules wrote on the blackboard," Kuna blabbers, rousing from sleep. "Heat is not

lost. It can't be. The equations won't add up otherwise. Try again! What you have on the left side? Right! What you have on the right side? Left! Do you see the sign in the middle? Those squiggly lines in the middle, very fine, very delicate, like floating gossamer. Look hard at it! Do you see it? Do you? You need to travel to the heart of it and she will be there, adorned in colors, you'll find heat there. Right, students?"

CHAPTER VI
SAILORS OF THE SECOND SEA

23rd Jul, 1999

Every Friday Chandrakanta visits the temple. A weekly observance that many simpleton females like her follow to appease Santoshi Ma. The farce of fasting. Strict regiment of what to eat and what not. Ultimately, the aim is wish fulfillment. Be it a son, a husband, a job, or better exam results, the list of wishes come in all sorts of custom order. How does Chandrakanta's wish diary look like I don't know? She will never tell me. But I suspect that it's for a suitable husband. Just shy of eighteen, she must be getting ready to follow the footsteps of her older sister who married young and is already ballooning with the second child. Plus, there must be plenty of vultures out there marking Chandrakanta because of her good looks and waiting for her eighteenth birthday to slip the marriage proposal. She assists her father in his tailor shop on a regular basis. For the young, unmarried men who patronize the shop, she is a delectable temptation.

So every Friday having washed her hair and face freshly soaped, she hikes the Temple Road by herself; not even a bindi on her forehead, plus the undried braid passing dampness to her kameez in splotches. Morning favors her like no other, not even the tallest peak on earth. The sun doesn't have to pour down. Nor the overcast conditions have to protect her with soft tint. Without any aid she fashions the freshness of the early hour, most strikingly in the tenderness of her eyes. Her dupatta will be wrapped around

her neck like a loose scarf, defying style or sassiness. And the ends of it will be dangling by her breasts all the way down to the hand. And there, quite cheekily wrapped within the end folds of the dupatta will be a packet of offering: gud and channa. No offerings from the outside are allowed at the temple. Of all the rules that defy logic and practice, this one is the Olympic winner. A couple of years back, Mother and Mantu hatched the scheme of shunning the outside oblation to the temple premise. Their alibi was that the purity of market products could not be trusted and the words of the devotees cannot be taken on face value. Instead, the stalls of puja products were opened within the temple compound itself. The entire supply chain was promised to be closely monitored to ensure that the sanctity of items was not compromised. So from lamps to incense sticks, from flowers to food offerings, the sale was meant to be comprehensive in scale and ambition.

Father was absolutely revolted when he heard the news. “This is outrageous! No devotee will buy such a flimsy excuse. Are they managing a temple or running a cinema hall? Why a devotee can’t bring a flower or fruit grown in his garden? And how are they going to make their suppliers stay pure one must ask? No temple can enforce such a dictate. No devotee will ever put up with it. Their greed will be exposed like an elephant in the daylight.” I agreed with Father.

But to estimate Mantu’s scheming acumen is to measure the depth of the sea. He must have anticipated the initial disapproval among the devotees. Also, there was the possibility that the devotees would turn to other temples in the town and many rudimentary shrines under the trees. So he handed the entire supply contract to a single vendor who was willing to sell the items a touch shy of the bazaar price. The understanding was that the volume of sale will eventually offset the slim profit margin on

individual products. When a devotee discovered that he could buy a coconut at the temple twenty-five paisa short of the market rate, the economic sense trumped over any accusation of profiteering. To brainwash the gullible minds further the lie was circulated that Mother was bearing personal loss to spare the devotees of any inconvenience. So through the nefarious mix of lies and business sense, the scheme was made a reality. Sure, there were occasional arguments, confrontations, pleas, defiance, and questioning by the devotees. But they were eclipsed by a witless majority who moved past the lie without much fuss. And a few months into the setup when the prices were raised incrementally in the name of changing season, wholesale market strike, truck drivers' strike, or petrol rate hike, the practice was too entrenched by then to be challenged. Grumbling and complaints were only sporadic; they could never congeal into anything threatening or substantial.

Chandrakanta though is not to be fazed by dictum of any kind. She operates by her own stubborn logic. Whereas the threat of ill omen or police will work on most, she has a way of circumnavigating it in utter dismissiveness. It happened so that a banar spotted the packet wrapped in her dupatta and demanded a search. The banars were only getting more brazen in their tactics as they were becoming successful in confronting uncomplying devotees, making them drop their outside purchases, or turning them away altogether. When Chandrakanta ignored the banar and kept walking, he yanked her dupatta from behind. The slap that followed echoed like the splitting of a tree trunk. The banar who stood red-faced, with the hand on his cheek, never would have imagined that Chandrakanta's delicate hands were capable of such booming impact. The entire banar gang and myriad minions descended to resolve the matter. But Chandrakanta didn't even

deign to engage them. She simply walked away giving one firm warning: “If you think you can test my patience on my day of fasting, then I dare you to touch me again.” From that day on, the banars considered it prudent to turn a blind eye to Chandrakanta’s weekly visits to the temple.

I stand behind the fence wall, resting my chin on the cool concrete top. My eyes are trained down the road. Sulekha appears behind me and startles me by breaking my trance. Mother wants to see me, she says. I tell her I am busy. What are you up to? she asks. Since when you’re such a spy, I reply. She leaves only after making her disapproval audible. She’s growing horns I tell you. Now that she has established herself as Mother’s lackey and cemented her position in this house, quite opinionated she’s becoming. And why should Mother want to see me anyway? What’s troubling her now? Hardly a minor ailment she suffers and suddenly the goings on of the entire universe needs to be recalibrated. Two days back she collapsed in the office room, complaining of the shortness of breath. She asked to be taken to her room and left alone to commune with the goddess.

Now consider this. The woman suffers bizarre physical spasms when she gets possessed by spirits, gyrating, convulsing, gliding in and out of hysteria as demanded by weekly hukums, festivals, and the rituals for moneyed clientele. Now stack that against a plain day when she complains of physical distress. Why is that genuine and not a case of the body purging itself of residual fakery? Father points out that her breathing complaints are getting more frequent lately and she should see a doctor. But I say let her have it. She’s just a desperate trickster drawing attention to herself through self-pitying tricks. Moreover, never underestimate the woman’s capacity for premeditation or her

purposefulness behind showbazi. Suppose the truth comes out that she has been knotting and plotting alongside criminal conspirators. The people from Crime Branch or CBI have not come knocking on our door yet. But it could be any day I fear. What defense can she have for herself? What sort of justification can she have ready for Father? There, you have to imagine how handy the plea of fragile health can come. Already there are trendsetters in this regard; accused politicians, businessmen, and demigods making up elaborate excuses of chest pain, high blood pressure, and breathing problems to cut short their probation or jail sentence. So why not then Mother is only staging a test run for her future course of action?

To the right of me, behind the long run of casuarina and chakunda, the top half of the temple sticks out; its eastern flank is tremendously bright as the sun favors its limestone surface. It still amazes me how this flawed piece of structure has not imploded to dust yet. Its crookedness seems so obvious to me from the distance, but not to others. I have even asked Shama if from the sea the temple appears slanted. He would scoff at the idea: “Eppudu, bacha! Never would I lay my eyes on that thing before setting off on my journey. I’ve my own goddess to worry about. When I am sailing to her embrace, I won’t make her jealous by thinking of a lesser rival.” Well, no one may see things like me, but they have to agree that the temple is standing on pilfered time. It may have been able to withstand minor storms and gales so far, but against a major tufan it has no chance. And with its toppling will be uprooted Mother’s vanity. Her devotees would have to question her credibility: if she can’t protect her sanctuary how could she protect them? Then we’ll see how firmly her criminal friends will stand behind her. They have saved her on many occasions already, even going as far to suppress her culpability in Ramesh’s death.

When Ramesh's father returned after cremating his son's body, he did not touch the plate of food put before him. He did not sit on the chair that was offered to him. He did not even wipe his face that had the stains of ghee and ash. He found himself in the presence of Mother and Amrish Puri, who have seated themselves in armchairs and carefully strategized in the anticipation of this encounter. Two constables lingered in unobtrusive distance. But their presence signaled loudly that preparation has been made for contingency.

Ramesh's father got the sense of the design. He might have started more forcefully, more vehemently, accusing Mother of murder. Instead, he cracked like a wrecked man, barely audible through lacerated sobs: "What do you expect me to tell his mother? What should I tell his little brothers and sisters?...why...aren't you a mother too?"

Mother gave a ready reply: "If you think he wasn't like a son to me, then go and check the kitchen. No food has been cooked since yesterday. This is a house of mourners too."

"But your sons didn't climb the temple, did they? Mine did...ten hours I spent on the bus hoping this is all a lie...but when I got here, his face..."

Mother stuck to the rehearsed course splendidly. "Listen, if you think I killed your son then put me before the judge. I'm ready to face prison if that will bring your son back. The day Ramesh put foot in my house he was a brother to my sons. In no way he wore or ate less than any of them. I even went to lengths to put a paita on him so that no one taunts him as a casteless. Why do you think I did that?"

“That’s how you fooled me...” the father protested. “If only I knew your design—”

“Design?” Amrish Puri intervened. “What sort of talk is that? We don’t want to add to your grief, but know that questions could be raised about why you put your son to domestic labor instead of sending him to school.”

Mother got up from the chair and walked up to the father with a small packet she was carrying in her lap. Putting it in his hand, she said, “I’m the messenger of Thakurani and I operate by her command. Had she not told me so in my dreams, I never would have let Ramesh climb the temple. So if your heart is given in to doubt, then I’ve my own questions too. I’ll ask Thakurani why she snatched a child away so full of life. This money is not the price of your son, but the grief of a mother who lost a child of her own. Now, if you’ll pardon me I need to complete the puja for Ramesh’s well-being in the next world.” Mother disappeared into the house before Ramesh’s father could register any protest. Amrish Puri now stepped in to take control of the situation. Ramesh’s father was left in no doubt when the inspector’s hand came to rest on his shoulder. It was not a simple gesture of commiseration, but a firm message on whose side the law was nesting. The man just stood there, staring at the packet in his hand. Finally, he blurted out: “The damned fate of being poor is no amount is too low for your child... You let the monsters and killers bid for their lives.” Amrish Puri would have countered his accusations, but the man had already turned around and was on his way out.

Father was aghast since the moment he heard of Ramesh’s fall to death. He paced in his room quite nervously. Since Mother was busy caballing her way out with her confidants and avoiding a confrontation with him, he spoke to us children candidly of

how something terrible was about to happen. How there could be an inquiry and how Mother could be taken into police custody. But when he heard how Ramesh's father was dispatched, he must have realized for the first time of Mother's unassailable web of influence. She must have seemed to him as one of those mafia bosses you see in the movies. Later that night at the dinner table Father said:

"I hope you've learned your lesson. Don't think that because it's not your own blood it can be washed off easily."

"Don't you open my mouth!" Mother snapped. "I know you'd rather see me be sent to the gallows, but I will fight off any evil eye for the sake of my children."

As a rule, Father never walks off the dinner table, no matter how rancorous his arguments may get with Mother. But that night he broke his principle.

I size up the temple again, that beaming tower of turpitude, and I cannot help but be reminded of an innocent boy's blood on its floor that got washed off so immaculately. No bleaching agent in the world could boast of such effectiveness. No ripple of memory retained. No cry for justice heard...It begins again. I see them...like a billowing tail of a rocket, blurring the treeline, sweeping the horizon into folds of fog. I hold to fence wall for support. Burning curls overlapping like filigree work, the trees, the poles, and dwarfed bushes in the distant fields transform into numbers. I watch the world going aflame. I close my eyes fearing that I will get consumed if I keep watching them. I've thought of letting Father know of these eddies of numbers, which are only getting more frequent and out of control, and each time they suck me into suffocating abyss. He will look for a cause in his repertory and be able to determine the name of the illness. But he

may also conclude that it's a sign of a malfunctional brain, which for sure is becoming the trademark of this family.

I open my eyes to find the flaming digits receding to the periphery of my vision, but my immediate sight is still void of clarity. I discern a solitary figure walking by and I know she is Chandrakanta. Yet, my befuddled mind resists wholeheartedly, staging a mutiny alongside my overwhelmed nervous system. Regaining my composure, I catch up with her, walking side by side and matching our footsteps. She has not betrayed any hint of my presence yet; not even a side glance, a false step, or the tightening of her dupatta. Still, I am soaking up her mute presence like a sponge: the freshness of her hair will be a lingering torture, the lips that do not close fully, and her eyes so lively. It's a surprise that not even once she has appeared in my dreams, not even to torture me from a tantalizing distance, which she is so good at in real life. Uncompromising and relentless, that's the problem with her. You could try a thousand filmy tricks to woo her; yet, you could be equally sure that each one will fail spectacularly.

"So you won't talk to me?" Still no response. "The crow won't shit on your tongue if you respond."

"Why do you have to bother me on a Friday?" she says. "You know I am not supposed to say anything rude today."

"Oh, if that means your prayer for a husband won't get answered then you know I won't leave you alone. Why do you have to be this stubborn? When did I say I won't marry you? Look at me!"

She did. Not a single feature on her face alters when she's angry except for those eyes which in spite of its venom doesn't diminish her beauty.

“On Tuesday I went to the shop around two, thinking that your father would have gone home for nap. But there he was in the shop all by himself and no sign of you. Where were you, haan? Don’t think that you can fool around some boy and I won’t know.”

She paused and turned around to face me fully: “You know my reputation, Cheeku. I won’t put up with any nonsense on my day of fasting. You say one more sleazy thing then you’ll have it from me. I won’t treat you any differently from your mother’s minions if it comes to that.”

“Then why won’t you answer my question? If you’re secretly meeting someone then I need to know. What is he promising you? House? Maids? Car?”

She turns around and starts off in a rushed pace; her attitude more rebuffing than before.

“Chandrakanta!” I call out in my jest to catch up. And immediately, I know what will follow.

She pauses again: “How many times I’ve told you not to call me by that name? If I am Chandrakanta then you’re Krur Singh. And you’re as despicable and ugly as that man. You think of yourself as a nawab, don’t you? Going about and mangling people’s names as you like? Keep calling me that and you’ll marry the real Chandrakanta when she arrives.”

“Maybe I am Krur Singh but I’ll still make you love me,” I say, giving a teasing smile. We walk again, silently for a while before I tell her: “There was a time when I used to come to your shop and we would talk for hours in your father’s absence. Your tongue wasn’t used to run sayen sayen like your father’s scissor. One time your father

asked why I was there all the time. And you lied to him that we were talking about studies.”

“That’s because I used to think you were a nice man.”

“Achha! What did I do to unperch myself from your pedestal of worthy people?”

“I thought you were the good one in your family. But then I realized you’re the opposite, more shameless than your mad brother and more cruel than your mother. The entire town may see your family with awe and caution. But I am not scared a lick. I only go to your temple because of Santoshi Ma’s shrine. Otherwise, I won’t come anywhere close to you or your house.”

“Even if you write it on stone I won’t believe that. I’m not like my mother and brothers and you know that. They are the ones who bungle it and I go about setting things right. Anyone with a sliver of sense can see that.”

“Yes, I’ve seen it myself. The way you were salivating over that drama actress I’ve seen it.”

“So, this is why you’re so feisty. Since your jealousy got the best of you, you’re dragging me through my family’s muck.”

“No, I am right. Your vulgar tongue and eyes will invade anywhere. Your brother undresses himself in the middle of bazaar and you undress women with your eyes.”

“So convenient, isn’t it, for you to forget that it’s you who once lifted your skirt to make me check a bug bite on your calf.”

“That was a mistake.”

“Why are you so dramatic? Has someone asked for your hand already?”

“You’re such a pest, Cheeku. I’m trying to have a clean mind on my way to the temple and you swoop on me with your lecherous piffle, reminding me that talking to you is like scalding one’s tongue. You and your family are so obsessed that once they set their eyes on something they must have it. Yes, that’s what people say about your family. Just because they don’t tell it to your face, doesn’t mean that in the privacy of their homes their lips are sealed too.”

I am so fired up that I can taste ash in my mouth. I wish to turn around and never cross her path again. Instead I say: “For all that pretense of fasting and clean thoughts, you’re lying through your teeth. Look at me and tell me that you’ve burned all your feelings for me. And all those hours of chat that we had was for nothing. And those times when you shared your lunch of fish with me was for nothing.”

“That’s because I felt pity for you to be rich and not get fish at home.”

We’re now upon the compound wall of the temple, its smoothly plastered whiteness and the evenly spaced marble steles that carry the names of the donors. I spot pearls of perspiration above her upper lip; yet her breathing does not betray any sign of exhaustion. In spewing bloodrush, we covered two sharp bends on the road and a steady uphill gradient to get to the top of the knoll where the temple is erected. Few cars have lined up on one side of the road, and further down, the two wheelers are parked in orderless haste. Only a narrow opening is left in the road for vehicles to go through, one at a time. End of the week is usually a favored time for the out-of-the-town visitors, a point that Mother reiterates to broadcast her popularity.

I despise the scenario of following Chandrakanta to the temple; she will only dial up her hate knob. Further, Mantu will be lurking around at this hour for sure. He will

come meddling, acting pious and solicitous. Yet, I can't leave off our conversation on such a tentative note, not when her barb of resentment has pierced my bone. Till now I used to think that the fall out in our routine and her wall of indifference was a result of my insistence to see her more, specifically when I dropped the hint of the secluded spot in the casuarina groves as a meeting place. But she didn't flinch at the suggestion as I had anticipated. She maintained her demeanor instead and said, "Why there? So that you could try on me all the things you learned from your brother?" I thought she wanted me to appease her by apologizing and grovelling. But now I feel like she's ready to cast off the thoughts of me like a flotsam.

Before we get to the opening arch of the temple, I let her know: "I'll be waiting for you here. And I'll walk back with you."

"Why? Even if the world turns in reverse I'm not bringing any good news to you."

"Then at least we can decide who is the heartless and stubborn one between us."

The entryway sits at a two-step elevation from the street-level, completed by a two-step descent on the other side that gets you into the compound. The entire platform is made of finely carved khondalite stone, matched by the archway above in its make. The steps are wide and long to serve as the shoe and chappal storage for the devotees, who can retrieve them on their way back. But this pattern is not without risks, since footwears get stolen all the time or get accidentally swapped with another. Sniffing out an opportunity to make money, Mantu established a shoe stand by the entryway and assigned a banar there so that the devotees can leave their footwears in attended care for one rupee and visit the temple in peace of mind.

I expect Chandrakanta to give the shoe stand a pass. But when she doesn't even pause to leave her chappals at the steps, I look at her feet. They're bare and dusty. "Where are your chappals?" I ask. She proceeds without looking back or relenting. Of course, the prohibited parcel is still ensconced in the folds of her dupatta. Two banars standing on each side of the landing spot her right away. But the most they could do is to censure her with impotent glare. She marches past them in pure nonchalance not even deigning to pick their presence with her side vision.

I do not err in the direction of the temple unless it is absolutely necessary. But each time I get here there's some novelty that catches my attention. I notice this time the midriff section of the assembly mandap's columns are studded with marble tiles. Their wispy patterns contrast against the unblemished white of the columns like a colorful wristband. Last time I was here the miniature shrines dotting the circumference of the compound were freshly painted in white while their canopies flaunted serrated lines of vermilion. The fastidiousness and relentless predictability with which these beautifications are undertaken seems like a cancerous disease. It was like the story of Indraprastha in Mahabharat, where the newly coronated emperor Yudhistir shows off his stature by gemming and aggrandizing the monuments of his palace. Yes, palace, that's how Mantu views this piece of property, and its material and mythical content therein. Mother has given him unassailable latitude, and mentally he has inherited Mother's assets and estate to his name already. Mother may have commissioned the temple, but it is Mantu who owns it. That's why he goes about embellishing any inventory that catches his fancy for his personal satisfaction and affirmation. To evince his sense of ownership further there are orderlies, who monitor that the decorum, discipline and cleanliness of

the premise are never compromised. A child's stray hand that's about to lace sindur on the white wall is restrained. A callous devotee who tosses aside a banana peel or coconut shell is chastised. Muddy footprints are immediately mopped. Debris and discards are thoroughly and meticulously disposed. Even a flying bird's droppings are not allowed to dry in this precinct. Why, you must ask, such regimen of sanitation is maintained here that could not be even seconded by the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi? The simple answer is this is Mantu's palace, his home. The man spends less time at the house than here. The rooster may skip perching atop his pen for a day, but not Mantu. There at the far end of the compound you'll find him in this specially and separately built office which with its four spacious windows and a door afford him a commanding view of the entire precinct. Not even in winter when his so-called asthma bouts are the worst he shuts the windows; instead, preferring to bundle himself up in layers of shawls and monkey cap like those ghostly chowkidaars in movies.

I've heard Mother compliment Mantu for his presence of mind on such renovation works. Her reaction often suggests that she is not even aware of the change until the project has been undertaken. It's like she has given him a freehand to run this place the way he chooses. Or it's her way of acknowledging that her coffers and prominence would not have swelled had it not been for the Chanakya nitis of Mantu. The precision with which he strategizes, the measly opportunities he seeks out in moneymaking, his fierce account-keeping, and the ways he reinvents the use of the resources at his disposal are quite remarkable and at the same time quite suspicious for a man who has seldom ventured beyond the distance between the house and the temple. I bet if you ask him what's the color of the sea, his response will be of absolute cluelessness. When Kuna and

I could not contain ourselves in the house when there would be a circus, magic show or a superhit movie in town, Mantu would be happy being at home because excitement was overwhelming to him. He shuns cars, buses, trains, or any other moving medium for that matter, because he gets easily motion-sick. To my recollection I've never seen him sit in the family car either. And to remember when was the last time he ventured beyond the town will be like rummaging through historical archives. Yet, for a man so fragile, so insularly tethered, he has an unbreachable hold over his affairs. Be it merchants, wholesalers, clients, worksmen or orderlies, no one can trick him because of his lack of first-hand experience of the world. Why, I've never even seen him read a book or a newspaper. Yet, he seems to be born with a capacity for such business foresight and expansion mania that even Tatas and Ambanis will be inferior counterparts.

I doubt if anyone can be capable of such contradictions. The ruse of asthma, wheezing problems, weather sensitiveness, and frail constitution are pure decoys to distract his opponents into gullibility and when they slip into complacency he strikes. I've heard tales. One contractor who was hired for a certain construction project thought of outsmarting Mantu by rigging the count of cement sacks purchased. Little did he know that the wholesale vendor with whom he connived had an assistant, a devotee plus an adept mole. The requital went as far as bludgeoning the contractor's career; he had to leave the district to restart his business. As for the cement dealer, he saw a massive raid on his godown and was dropped like a fly from all government projects, credit for which goes to MLA Khalnaik. So it does not add up that a man who appears so docile and toothless from outside is unforgivingly venomous within. I am sure that he uses the mask

of chronic illness as a sympathy magnet. When I relay such convictions to Father, he disagrees with him.

“You misread him, Cheeku,” he says, taking his side. “When I come to think of it, I feel he bore the worst brunt among the three of you because he’s the eldest one. Kuna and you were shielded in a way that he couldn’t. When your mother got possessed for the first time, he was only ten but well aware of the world about him. She was quite a sight, very disturbing and intimidating. Her hair would be fanned out, sindur smudged, eyes dripping red, tooth and nail marks all over her body. Most of the nights she would not sleep and faint due to exhaustion. The nights were the worst, Cheeku. I still can’t bring myself to picture those scenes without getting goosebumps. Her piercing shrieks will strike you out of nowhere, and they were not even in her voice. At exactly two in the morning there’ll come loud pounding noise from under her bed. I would check under the bed regularly, but there was nobody. I started to keep the lights on. Still, the knocking would not go away. As if an invisible hand was rattling the core of the bed. I moved her out of our bedroom and put her on a string cot. The knocking vanished from her room, but reappeared behind the wooden closet by which she was sleeping. I was so distraught and confused. I sought relatives and neighbors’ help. Your mother’s sister arrived to take care of you all, whereas friends and neighbors joined me to keep the nightly vigil. That night no knocking was heard at two o’clock. We felt assured. But the moment we turned the lights off, it was like the bursting of a dam. All the wooden materials in the house started rattling with terrible force, and on her bed I watched your mother’s silhouette bounce off the mattress repeatedly like a rubber ball. A terrible feeling seized me. I realized that there was something deeper and stranger at work here.

“I never believed in tantric claptrap. Not even when people recommended babas and guniyas to me. I summoned the help of doctors instead and they diagnosed that it’s a case of psychiatric disorder. But when the medicines failed and the abnormal behavior didn’t stop, the faint hearted sympathizers started to desert me. You were just two, Cheeku, and the entire commotion had already taken a toll on your health. So I sent you and Kuna off to Dhanbad with your aunt. But I could not send Mantu off partly because I thought only an offspring could pull someone from the precipice of psychosis and partly because of my own selfish desperation not to be left alone. As your mother’s condition worsened, imagine the scar it must have left on a child’s inchoate mind, who by the way was doubly fragile because of the congenital wheezing problems. He was the one to discover the severed talon in the back compound and the pattern that it only appeared on the fridays. We would take the talon and bury it in a deep hole or cast it off in the sewer. But the next friday, another severed talon would appear with a red thread around it. We kept watch over the back compound. Then it would appear in the front or on the top of the roof or in the most obscure corner of the yard. Imagine the havoc it would have caused on a child’s psyche when the adults were bereft of any rational explanation.

“But then the worst thing happened. During that phase your mother was in the habit of locking herself in her room, hollering and shrieking, cursing unknown names, and rocking back and forth. Upon my exhortations, she would open the door, but her eyes would be bleary and full of hatred. So for her safety I pried apart the bolts and latches in all the doors. But then one early morning I must have dozed off and when I woke up I found the door to her room jammed. I don’t know how she accomplished it. But no matter how much I tried I could not force open the door. I had to get a hatchet and hack

the door down. Mantu was by my side and so were others. And when the door fell down, the first thing I noticed was not your mother who was lying hunched over with her arms outstretched, but the twin trails of blood running on the wall from ceiling to the floor. I thought she was dead, Cheeku. I really did. Mantu, that child, I still remember his shriek because he must have feared the same too. But when your mother gained back her consciousness she appeared so depleted and torpid that I realized this could not continue any more. It was only a matter of time before she would snag like a tattered thread. But then life gives no assurance of predictability, Cheeku. And thank heavens, so was the case with your mother's health. Those bizarre phenomena disappeared one day just as abruptly as they had begun. Your mother emerged from the entire episode a new woman. She assigned a supernatural connotation to it, and framed her experience and survival in supernal light. My confidence was so hollowed out by then that I could not persuade her otherwise. It's shameful, really appalling. Had she given the scientific considerations a chance, then she might have found explanation in hallucinations or mass hypnosis. Otherwise, how else could you rationalize those months-long ordeal? Occult, paranormal, tantra vidya, or black magic finds abode only in unlettered minds. Sadly, your mother is no different.

“Three years later, Mantu had the worst asthma attack of his life. We rushed him to the hospital. His lungs were severely swollen and inflamed. He was so disoriented and breathless that he could hardly keep still. The doctors injected anti-inflammatory medication, but it was no good. He desperately needed assisted breathing and the only mechanical ventilator at the hospital was not even functional. During that chaos Mantu slipped into coma and we were told that it was too late. I sat there in the hospital corridor,

benumbed, and trying to make sense of what just happened, while your mother sat by Mantu's bed and prayed for his life. She sat like that for more than a day. And to our relief, Mantu slowly regained consciousness and returned to normalcy. Once again, it was the case of the body naturally recuperating and the medicines taking slow effect. But your mother thought she singlehandedly snatched Mantu out of the jaws of death. Why should I try to throw water on her triumph, since I was only happy to have my son back? I surely failed though to foresee the implication of letting her take the credit. For her it was a reaffirmation, a second sign if you will, that she is a divinely ordained healer and a messenger. And she has special power that no one else has. As for your brother, he sided with her story unequivocally and gravitated toward her cultist brand of faith for the second lease of life. Having escaped death and being fragile to begin with, he found the simple answers that the cultism peddled reassuring. I saw him join your mother in daily rituals, assist her during the hukum session, and be the first-hand witness to her soaring popularity. When it became obvious that he has no intention of pursuing studies after matriculation I protested. But I found him very set in his ways to continue a life in your mother's footsteps. He never got a fair chance, Cheeku. And I'll never believe that he has any ulterior motive or baneful intentions. He's just blind to his actions because of his naive filial devotion, and because he feels indebted to your mother and the goddess."

So typical of Father to hand Mantu a clean report card. But before he issues his verdict will he visit the temple for himself to witness the workings of Mantu? He stays isolated in his chamber. And what he misses through direct observation cannot be substituted by Mantu's childhood innocence. Presently having a panoramic view of the temple compound, I see the game plan of a master planner. A case in point is the ablution

trough by the waste receptacles, where the water from the trough constantly overflows, swilling its way through a paved walkway around the trough. Devotees simply amble through the walkway to have their feet cleansed and they caress the trough's water surface to purify their hands. And who were the enablers behind such coddling convenience? The local PWD department's chief, and an illegal and unaccounted for industrial water outlet installed overnight. But then the ultimate credit for this wasteful marvel lies with Mantu, who was inspired after hearing of such a system at the Jagannath Mandir.

And then, there is the story of the marble floor of the assembly hall. When Mantu decided on renovating the old concrete floor to a marble one, the cost of the undertaking boggled him. Undaunted, he found a solution in a marble and granite contractor who was baited by the promise that Mother's tantric horsepower will soar his fledgling business to new heights. When the promise of new contracts did not materialize, the Bhandur Ram threatened mutiny: he better be compensated, he gnashed, for his investment or he would expose Mother before her devotees. But Mantu, the master architect, immediately roped in a competing merchant to marble the eleven steps to the assembly hall at the market price and with proper receipts. Now it was Mantu who browbeat the renegade contractor. With a section of the renovation work legally and properly completed, Mantu threatened to spin the lie that the rebel contractor was paid in cash and when the quality of his work proved to be inferior and a competitor was hired, the envy made the contractor go rogue.

Aside such underhanded tales more transparent example is the very appearance of the temple. If Father will ever come here, the first question he'll ask is how is this temple maintained so tiptop all year round? Not a blotch of moss or mildew or discoloration

afflict the faces and walls of this obelisk of opulence. Now who underwrites the expense each year of whitewashing and painting the temple? Again, another opportunistic devotee, a hardware merchant, who for his contribution is richly rewarded with the maintenance projects of the government buildings. Doesn't Father see a pattern in all these? Mantu's yesteryears innocence which Father so stubbornly attests is quintessentially the formative years of a cobra who was yet to discover the potency of his fangs. Ask Mantu why he does so much for the temple, he'll give you a prime example of his eloquent ass-licking. In his squeaky, constricted tone he'll coo: "If I don't do this for Mother then who will? She's alone in her trial."

Trial, my foot! An army of chela chamundas do her bidding, from sunup to night end, shedding their last trace of dignity and self-worth at the altar of sycophancy. And she's suffering alone, is it? There, on the extreme right of the compound, sale of the puja materials are conducted from the wood- framed stalls with pitched tin roofs. In each of them I see two to three banars transacting with the devotees in brimming self-importance. Each time I am here I spot a new face among them: teenagers, hardly fourteen or fifteen, in some cases even younger, plucked from the remote parts of the state, whose families are only too happy to give them away in exchange of a paltry monthly stipend. They arrive here with much trepidation, but a cheap thread ceremony later, they are adorned with a paita on their torsos, and declared brahmin and pure enough to serve at the temple. These underfed scamps soon realize that not only will they get two hefty meals per day but they get to feel distinguished and pious in front of the devotees. Why would then they object of being severed from their pasts permanently and put to the service of their opportunistic masters?

In the stalls I see on display the banars' daily tedium to make the offerings appealing to buyers. At the first stall flower baskets are arranged by color contrast and from hooks garlands are hung in looping shapes. At the stall of camphor, incense and clay lamps, I see pyramids; clay lamps stacked in interspatial and decremental sequence to mimic the shape of pyramids. From fifty paisa to two rupees, as the price of the lamp grows so does the scale of the pyramid. Further, at the bhoga-raga stall sugary khajas are stacked like a circular lattice fence, and beside it banars take turns to ward off flies and bees. So many hours of painstaking labor goes each day into propping up such intricate appearances. Then it gets dismantled at the day's end and resurrected all over again the next morning. Why such exactitude? Isn't it the evidence of a megalomaniac emperor being uncompromising in his finery? I watch the banars, their bare torsos, the six-threaded paitas gleaming as pristine rivulets over their tanned bareness, the checkered loincloths, and the similarity of their faces. I am reminded of Ramesh. He was of the same age when he came to us. Do these boys know that a ghost of their brethren walks among them and what they have been cleansing off the temple's precinct are the very clues to their future? Mother took a break from child exploitation after Ramesh's death, and that explains why after him all our domestic servants were older women. But it was Mantu who convinced Mother to tap again into the inexpensive source of child labor. It was his idea to build a "quarter" for these louts down the road so that they will be hostelled under the supervision of the temple priest and his wife. It was his idea to start a small garden, an orchard, and recently, a vegetable yard with the labor of the banars so as to start the process of becoming an independent producer to amass further profit. It was his idea...

I spot a familiar figure enter the temple compound. His tall frame and gait immediately yanks me back to the present. I would have sensed him even if I were blindfolded, for not a single day has gone by that I haven't tried to crack the mercurial intentions of this man. Chandrakishore Chutiya makes his way toward Mantu's office, and in his hand is a polished paperbag, sprinkled with glitters. As the case with this man, he flaunts an exquisite taste that seems so foreign and suave. Of course, he has taken off his shoes at the entrance steps as his bodyguard keeps a watch over them with the same lurking alertness that reminds of that night. The posh car is not too far. A noiseless beast that it is it has sneaked up the road like a cheetah. In no time Chutiya returns but the packet is no longer with him. The bodyguard provides him a helping shoulder as he puts the shoes on. The car rolls by right past me but not without whipping up some jaw-dropping attention among the bystanders. A few even bend forward to look inside the car to ensure that the driver is indeed sitting on the wrong side of the vehicle.

I make a swift entry into the temple compound. The queasy feeling in my stomach won't subside; it's like five soda bottles opened at the same time. The concrete floor begins to feel hot under my feet. Marble tiles bearing the donors' names dotes the path before me. To the right of me in the vending stalls I notice a momentary lull in the activities of the banars. Not further down, two banars, hoisted upon the plinth of the temple which comes to the same level as the floor of the assembly hall, are scrubbing off bird droppings from the surface. I don't even pause to address their snigger. Mantu steps out from his office and is about to turn left, perhaps heading to the cooking chamber or refectory, but he stops short upon seeing me. My briskness must have warned him to be more cautious, since he slips back into his office in no time.

His chamber never needs lighting in the daytime owing to the spacious and numerous windows. But from outside the space resembles a burrow, hardly giving away if its inhabitant is in or out. When I enter his office that had an overpowering smell of incense and putrid nectarine, I find the packet right on the table at an arm's length from him. He must have sensed my curiosity since he drew the packet closer to him.

“Why did he come here?” I ask.

He must have been jolted by my sudden appearance, probing, and the direct reference to the visitor. But then he betrays no surprise as if his catalogue of reflexive emotions has been deliberately erased. “Why does it concern you?” His voice is soft and barely audible. I wonder if a frog got lodged in his throat at some point. His head is always tipped forward, whether he's sitting or standing. Never though he gets a kink in the neck. His tilted posture explains his protruding lips and fine-tipped nose, like an elongating ice needle responding to gravity. Mother would claim that Mantu's looks takes after Father. He does not look anything like him though I can assure you, except for the hair. Mantu is a walking advertisement for x-ray films. The way the bones stick out from his body you would think that a skeleton is wrapped with a human hide.

“So I guess you two are exchanging gifts behind Mother's back? What sort of favors are you granting him in return?”

He looks down as he taps the table's edge with his index finger. I know how to provoke him into talking. Perhaps he senses the same too.

“This is for Mother,” he replies finally. “Since she's sick and not receiving any audience, he stopped by here to leave the gift with me. I guess he knows too well who Mother trusts and who she doesn't.”

“Spectacular!” I say, sitting down on a chair. “Now we can have a conversation. That glittered bag must be carrying some special gift, right?” He deftly puts the bag under the table. “Relax! I am not after the gift. I’m just wondering what sort of relationship this man has with Mother. I bet if you look into the bag you’ll find the item nicely wrapped in a glossy packing. And a laced knot for the finish?”

He drinks the glass of water in front of him. And putting the glass down he says, “Not everyone is as perverted as you, Cheeku. To cast suspicion upon your own mother like that...don’t think that you’re too old to escape a sound chastisement.”

“And who will give a demonstration of that? You? Or the band of your henchmen who are waiting to appear upon ring of the bell?”

“You know Cheeku why you get away with so much insolence and mischief? Because you’re the son of Devaki Devi. You abuse the privilege her reputation affords you; yet, you’ve the gall to question her character.”

“Save that oily talk for someone else, will you? I just know something about that man that you’re clueless about. Tell me, the night he came to our house with the MLA and the inspector, were you part of that meeting?...nah, I didn’t think so. Why Mother left you out of that conference, did you ever find out?”

“Stop it!” I hear him raise his voice for the first time. “I do as I’m told. And I expect you to do the same too. Before I ban you from the temple forever, leave for your own good.”

I leave by noisily pushing the chair away from me. I need to engineer a distraction; somehow I need to get Mantu out of his chamber. There’s enough doubt in his head that perhaps I am not after the gift. So he might not be as protective of it as he

would have been otherwise. From the cooking chamber the spewing smoke is dense. Heavy preparation must be on for some feast. Many townfolks put orders for catering on occasions like birthdays or death anniversaries. While this means more income source for Mantu, the tradeoff for the vendee is auspicious and blessed food. To take this model of profit further the refectory adjacent to the kitchen works as the rental space to host bigger occasions for the clientele. I sense the cooking chamber to be a mine of action right now and I may be able to eke out a plan there.

I plant myself quite obtrusively in the middle of the action there. Cauldrons of food are hissing and bubbling, and the chief cook is incessant and rabid in dishing out directions. When I bump into one orderly and then another, the cook turns to me in agitation: “What do you want, Cheeku Babu?” His countenance, seasoned by age and experience, has no reason to be kind to me. His job is unequivocally secure here as long as he never transgresses the path of Mother or Mantu.

“Don’t use the last tin of oil that you got,” I say. “I’ll take it home with me.”

He turns around to take in the import of what I just said.

“If you don’t believe me then you can check with Mantu.”

When I proceed and put a hand on the unopened container, he howls: “Thau, thau, thau! Baba, you appear like a ghost and syphoning off a can that the customer paid for.”

“It’s up to you! Guests are waiting at the house because the meal could not be made without the oil. Upon Mother’s order I am here.”

He dashes out the door with a pithy instruction to an orderly to keep an eye out for the can. I know he has headed to Mantu’s chamber to confirm the matter. I slip out casually and sneak to the alleyway between the cooking chamber and the refectory, and

finally to the back area, from there I take a roundabout path to the front of Mantu's office. I wait behind the side wall, and when Mantu and the cook step out from the office and head away from me in the direction of the kitchen, I make a run. I am in a double mind, whether to open the packet right here in the office or to run away with it. With the first option I have to be really deft and quick, whereas with the second option there's a chance of being blocked off by the banars. In a quandary, I retrieve the packet from under the table and take out the gift case, which is sealed in an exquisite gift wrap as I anticipated. I dig into it with ten fingers and rip it apart like a hungry tiger. The outer wrap falls apart easily, but not the next layer. It looks like its seams are sealed in a secretive and dogged way. I can already hear Mantu's returning footsteps. I let out a curse and in my desperation the packet slips from my hand and lands under the table. Ducking myself under it as I give the packing one last try with my sharpest nail, I see Mantu's legs appear at the doorstep. A minor tear in the packing and I gouge it apart with my teeth. It takes Mantu several seconds to figure out that I am under the table. And what falls into my hand is a rectangular transparent case. There is no doubt in my mind about what I am holding.

“Emerge, I say,” Mantu orders in winded breath. “Before it's too late for you, hand me that packet.”

The replica of the goddess is unmistakable and the only metal that can radiate such striking hue is pure gold. I come out from under the table and straighten up, holding out the present for Mantu to see.

Once again, the cold-blooded reptile gives no sign of emotion. He has already dispatched the cook to round up as much manpower as he can. I can hear the cook shout at the top of his lungs.

I say, “He’s quite a devotee, isn’t he? Giving away a gift of twenty-four carat gold like that?”

“First of all give that thing back to me. And you can be sure that when Mother comes to know of it, the consequences will be beyond your imagination.”

“Forget about it. Tell me first what do you know about prasad? And what do you know about that ice factory?”

He takes two steps in my direction. And the door is now filled with minions to pounce on me with a snap of finger.

I persist: “If you get the gist of what I am saying then I need to know who is cooking it and who is distributing if you want your gift back?”

“I am not interested in your riddles of prasad or ice factory,” he says plainly, without caring to employ euphemism or discretion before others.

Can he really be that brazen or is Mother really on her own in this crime syndicate? I lob the case in his direction and he lunges for it so desperately as if he were diving for his own life.

I exit the scene heatedly but not without a watchful escort following me all the way to the entrance steps. When I am out on the road, I run into Chandrakanta. I expect her to shoo me away for the commotion that she must have witnessed. Instead she says, “Why do you look so pale? Have you seen a ghost?”

My tongue tastes dense and metallic as if gunpowder exploded on it. I say, “Yes, I saw my own ghost. And you’ll soon too when I die.” I turn around and head in the direction of the beach. This is the time for Shama to return home with his nightly catch, and I see no other way but to confide in him about the entire racket.

A game of cricket is on not too far from the fishermen’s colony. Between seven boys, many shirtless, the game is played passionately. The batsman takes the stance with his wickets exposed, and his cockiness only makes others tizzy. No shots can be played to the on side, that is toward the sea. So, all the fielders pack the off side field. Hardy legged though these nolia youths are, the batsman has worn them out already. All the excitement of the play has been replaced by drudgery on their faces. The keeper hollers at the bowler: “Ma giya, maar, spin maar! Rub some sand bei!” The rubber ball bounces off the glossy faced, wave caressed sand in anger, frustration, and rival zest. The ball pitches substantially and it looks capable of knocking the batsman’s teeth off. But at the very last second, the batsman maneuvers a delicate stroke and the ball flies off the gully area and lands safely to aggravate everyone’s agony. The bowler crosses his hands behind his head in utter cluelessness.

I march into the play area and signal the bowler to hand the ball to me. He indicates me to field like the rest of them and wait for my turn. When I show no sign of budging, the batsman intervenes to accept the challenge. With the ball in my hand, I mark myself for a long runup. When Kuna and I used to play cricket, he always had an upper hand over me. Being six years older than me and born burly, he had enough muscle power to wield the bat in one hand and whip the ball high for a six. But then it happened

one day. He had gotten so complacent of winning over me that he misjudged one delivery. The ball sneaked through the gap between the bat and legs, knocking off the stumps. Since that day whenever I bowled at him I always aimed at that gap, and what Kuna initially shrugged off as an error in judgment turned out to be his biggest weakness.

I target exactly the same opening with this batsman, who though years younger than me has acquired quite an air of invincibility. Of my first delivery, he scores a four. He treats the second delivery even more arrogantly, slamming it over my head. The third one he misses closely, and I tell to myself, even the vulture has a weak spot. The batsman did not realize how persistent I can be, and the fourth delivery crashes through his stumps, snapping one dry branch in half. The fielders rush toward me to congratulate and celebrate, and I see Shama wave at me as his boat lands ashore.

“Aye, Cheeku,” Shama calls out, “stop playing with kuni bacha. Come, play with the adults.” His companions help him push the motor boat well into the beach face. Then they try to spread apart the gillnet to untangle their catch. Shama, in the meanwhile, transfers stored catch from the central hold of the boat’s deck to an empty basket nearby. Between his spread fingers he scoops up large quantity of fish. I can’t pull him aside for a conversation easily. The usual rigamarole of vending and dispensing his catch will occupy him for half an hour or so, and if his wife is not at home, which is increasingly the case lately, then his three little children will crowd around him, begging for all sorts of attention. Fending them off, when he will finish his lunch, his state will become worse than an inebriate. The night’s wakefulness will disempower him so thoroughly that he will slide into comatose sleep as his children will lounge around him like comfort-seeking puppies. I have to give him a helping hand before he is yanked out of my reach

by his tedious routine.

“Aye Cheeku, you sully your hands? Devaki Devi’s son is wallowing in the foul of dead fish? What a shame!” Shama laughs. There’s something about the fish skin that always bothers me. It’s not just their slimy, scaly exterior; there’s something more unsettling about them.

“Did you make up your mind about our trip?” asks Shama.

“Soon,” I reply.

“Kine time darakar tora re? Been a year since you’re evading a reply. You’re just scared of the water, Cheeku. Admit it.”

“Don’t throw a challenge at me today or you’ll regret it.”

“Irre irre, full red your face has become. Did you fight with your mother? Or else why will you visit your poor friend under a scorching sun?” A smirk crosses the faces of Shama’s fishing mates. Two of them even nod their heads to express their relish at the barb.

I keep my retort sealed for now. Instead, I ask: “What brings out such life in you today? A good catch?”

“Nah! The sea is drying up. Where from will the fish come, when those babulog’s trawlers are snatching off everything living and precious out of water?”

“So the ice factory did not help then?”

“We have ice now, lots of ice. Only no fish to catch.” Shama breaks into a loud laugh. He rubs off his slimy hands against his pants and looks down for a moment. He then deposits the nearly full basket with a fisherwoman with the instructions to sell the contents for a wholesale price. He then asks another woman if his wife is at home, and

when he receives the answer in negative, he inquires about his kids. They are with his neighbor, playing with other children.

Turning to me, Shama says, “See, a fisherman’s life is jokhim-vara. Like an owl he spends the night at the sea, and when he returns home not even his wife is there to feed him. She’s gone to work as a majdur in some laot sahib’s orchard. What kind of life is this when our income from the sea is not enough, and we have to toil for landfolks to survive? The sea watches with clear eyes, my Baba says. You let her know your tribulations, and she will never hold it against you.”

Abruptly, Shama turns around and walks away. I trot to catch up with him and grab his elbow. He must have guessed my sense of urgency. “Is everything all right?” he asks. I signal in the direction away from the trading hubbub and the cricket match. When we are in clear and only the breeze witness to our conversation, I ask: “Do you know Chandrakishore, the ice factory man?”

Shama scratches his stubble thoughtfully. “Why, Cheeku? Why that man should concern you?”

“What do you know of him?”

“No more or less than what any haraami warrants. They land where they sniff opportunity and they leave as soon as their work is done.”

“So you don’t think that the ice factory is the real reason why he is here.”

“Why? What have you heard? Is this in the newspaper?”

“I will tell you everything but first you have to tell me what do you know about this man’s real business.”

Shama walks farther away and perches atop the cross slat of a small rowboat. I sit

down facing him with my back to the sea. Shama is gaunt and veiny, like most of the fishermen are. But his tanned skin has a dusky hue to it that is distinct. His facial expression swings erratically like a moody sea: too serious one minute, and girlishly cheerful the next. The thing that helps him enjoy a commanding position with his people and anyone for that matter is his soothing voice.

“Now Cheeku, not even a fly should get a whiff of this. I’ve heard terrible things about him. Khun ka case is upon him. He’s with the MLA so that no one will suspect about his killings and other criminal activities.”

“And you don’t know anything about prasad? Something that he’s passing to the fishermen?”

“Why? We get our ice from his factory and go about our business. You let a man like him come close to you and the entire sea will be insufficient to clean the muck off you. Nah baccha, keep that man away from you. But, you seem to know a lot about him. How so, Cheeku? Have you made a new friend?”

“Not a rotten criminal like him. I just overheard him and the MLA talking at the festival night...”

“Gaand chalaki, Cheeku! You didn’t pull me aside to tell a lie, right? There’s a stall opened in your mother’s name at the ice factory. I’ve seen it. ‘Prasad’ is not a strange word to my ears. Brahman people become pious eating that, don’t they?”

His expression is brimming with jocose rejoinder, but inside him the seed of anger is hardening. I realize that this conversation will be over in no time if I come out deviant in his eyes. “You know Mantu and Mother,” I say. “Someone shows them the hive of money and off they go whoring themselves in its pursuit. Chutiya came asking for

Mother's hand of protection and she offered it for the greed of quick money. Beyond that I don't think she knows more. But I've overheard Khalnaik and Chutiya discuss it. You believe it or not, but that's the truth. Before the police get the wind of their crime and shut the factory down, I came to warn you. Now, do you believe me?"

"If you insist, then yes. But it's funny that a brahman toka like you thought that by 'prasad' they meant something sinister."

"It's the low tone of their voices that gave them away. And of course, they mentioned that they're passing something to the fishermen."

"It won't be us, Cheeku," said Shama. "And you know that. We won't do any business with your mother or the MLA. Not after what they did to us. They must be dealing with the fisher folks by the jetti. Whatever they're sneaking to the sea must be from that route."

"But doesn't your father and your brothers live in that settlement? They must know something, right?"

He leaves his perch and comes close and sits by me. Bits of fish scales are lodged in his hair and beard. The salt of his skin smells of dead seaweed, not the ones that offend your senses but remind you of the endless sea. "My Baba lives farther down, not near the ice factory. But you can tell me the secret, Cheeku. I won't tell it to anyone. You know more about prasad, don't you?"

"I told you I have no knowledge. I came to warn you of the short future of the ice factory. That's all. Just watch and see, just watch those thugs ending up in the Tihar jail."

Shama emits another loud laugh, and gets up to leave: "It's the wrong people, who get punished, Cheeku. That truth hasn't changed since the sea started humming." He

starts marching away from me. He halts and half-turns at me: "The sea is not going to drown you. Get rid of your fear and come with me. We'll start all by ourselves one night and go deep into the sea. You'll learn and see things there that your books can't even teach you. And before the day breaks, I'll bring you back. Your mother won't even know."

"Oh, I don't care about her."

"Lies, Cheeku. You care for her and I know. A man who doesn't love his mother is cursed, and I won't have such an unlucky person in my boat." He takes off without paying attention to my scorn.

CHAPTER VII
THE WRONG HAND OF THE BUTCHER

5th Sep, 1999

I wait among the casuarina groves not too far from the temple. Earlier today, before the day break, I sneaked off with Kuna by convincing him to show a movie. He's at the cinema hall now. And in my bag is his treasured map and a severed goat head.

Sunday is the day of Bhakta Seba. Another sly name that Mother and Mantu have come up with to hoodwink the devotees. If devotees are to be offered *service* in any way on this day then that is in exchange of a sizeable donation. Higher the amount more attentive is the service. Those who are too poor to offer any money are treated with a phony smile from Mother and a half-hearted raise of her hand. A banar then thrusts a consecrated sweetmeat into their hands, and off they go, ushered away to make space for the next devotee in line. At the pre-dawn hour each Sunday, the pack of desperate commoners form a line outside the temple compound, knowing well that Devaki Devi's time is too precious for them. Yet, sickness, penury, and chimeric hope drive them. At nine, Mother begins her service, and the farce goes on till noon. But then there are luminary and weighty clients who have the license to jump the line without tiniest compunction, whereas the ordinary folks have come to accept the fact that to question such preferential treatment is to stage an affront against the higher power. Those who don't get their turn by noon are harshly turned away. Notwithstanding such mistreatment,

the line has steadily grown over years. How? Father has concluded that as far as sadhus and demigods are concerned, the entire nation is opiated. I though believe that these people are ghosts, queuing up for justice after perishing upon Mother's ill-advice.

But this Sunday is special. MLA Khalnaik had set an appointment with Mother right after the Bhakta Seba session. National election is only a month away and Khalnaik is getting restless like a grasshopper. His party is forecasted to lose badly. The thread by which he is hanging is Mother's complacency and his own bull-headed superstition. Mother is set to embark upon her month long sadhana today under strict dietary regimen. She has vowed to undertake fierce meditation: a three-hour session of japa each day for next thirty days; alone in the prayer chamber she will communicate with her goddess, invoking her thousand names, and thus securing the boon for Khalnaik's victory. Since today is the first day, Khalnaik will join her for a brief ceremony and once he departs Mother's ritual will begin. Knowing how superstitious both of them are, it is the opportune time to let off a bomb of ill-omen.

So far I've nothing concrete to hold against those thugs. What are they smuggling to the sea I'm not certain. Most likely it's gold and diamond and other gemstones, which explains the gift Chutiya gave to Mother. From Shama I could glean no further information. I roamed around the jetti area, which is more than five kilometers south of our beach. I staged two watchouts, one in the morning and one late at night. But the more I watched the more I realized that the jetti is quite a busy area no matter the hour of the day. I saw ton of catch getting offloaded and big fishing boats departing for the sea with blocks of ice. But nothing rang the alarm for me. In fact, jetti seemed like the most obvious place to smuggle contraband to the sea, and for that reason any smart crook will

avoid it. Moreover, didn't Chutiya raise the doubt that the fishermen may not agree to work for him because of their feud with Mother? Between our beach and the jetti, there are only two fishing villages. The one by the jetti are not wronged in any way by Mother and so would have no qualm against her cronies. That leaves only one fishing community in question. But then how could Shama be in dark about any underhand dealing conducted by his people? He's a notable leader of the community. At the same time Shama's rancor toward Mother is uncompromising and vicious. He would go to any length to sabotage her interests than let any of his fellow villager do her bidding. I'm left more baffled now than before. I've come to question, yes I have, that what I overheard through the close window that night is probably a garbled version of the truth. But then Mother's sherbet stall showed up, didn't it? If sherbet came out from one end, then where did prasad go?

When Mother was informed about how I "vandalized" the sanctity of her temple and the gift, she summoned me the same evening to her room. Her face was unwashed. Her deep, black hair was fanned out. Her eyes appeared small, as if still swimming through sleep. From her bed, feigning sickness, she moped: "People say the youngest child is the mother's favorite because never again she would have the joy of birthing another. But after what you did today, you've charred my affection for you. You're on your own from now on. Whatever malediction you invite from the goddess, you're left alone to fight it off."

"Indeed. I have no gift of gold to bribe my way out of it."

"Bah, spoken like your father. Know this though if I were to choose between my devotion and an ingrate son then I won't hesitate about my choice."

“Go ahead by all means. I would rather be motherless than bear the blood of a woman whose sincerity reeks worse than a tannery.”

The empty tea glass crashed on the floor not too far from me. The minute shards it made would not be gleaned off the floor no matter how fine a broom was brought. Sulekha and Mantu rushed in, concerned and blaring, directing their reproach toward me and cursing me for my insensitivity. I walked away from her room. Above this din though, Mother’s voice was the loudest; the infirm, mind you, packing the boom of a detonating missile: “Tread carefully from now on, you scoundrel! The next mischief you carry out will be your own final deed. And I would remember what you said to me when I see your dead body.”

Not a word has passed between us since then. This is the logical conclusion to our growing acrimony over years. I can’t be more content. By not having to communicate with her, I feel untainted and redeemed. But then to stand back and let her unfair agenda triumph is not an acceptable option either.

The morning show at the cinema hall will end just past noon. I’ll be outside the movie theater by then to announce to Kuna that Mother has taken away his map for the sacrificial fire that is meant to benefit Khalnaik. That will bring out the destructive monster in him: the true Bhimasen will arrive. To make the lie more believable, I’ll show him a torn piece of the map. That will thicken his rage like tar. Already the movie would have soured his mood considerably. On Sunday mornings the cinema hall passes off porn in the name of “foreign film.” Some random English movie will be projected on the screen at first and in matter of ten minutes a different film will take over, men and women having sex in blue glow, and hollering their lungs out. The crowd joins them in

hooting and whistling. The Sunday show is popular among the young and older men alike, who devise ingenious excuses to bluff to their parents or wives to be there. To sneak Kuna in I had to grease the palm of the ticket collector, who is an old school friend of mine. The last time Kuna went to the movie hall by himself, he was thrown out. An on-screen passion between the hero and the heroine stoked him up badly, and in matter of seconds he was by the screen, threatening to tear it out and whooping profanity so wild that even grown men in the crowd cringed in embarrassment. At least the actors were fully clothed in that movie. Quite tame in comparison to the nude rumpus of the Sunday shows. So provided that Kuna does not burn down the cinema hall, he'll be in an agitated state by the time the show is over. Upon hearing that his precious map is gone, he'll descend upon the temple like thousand earthquakes. As the scrimmage will break out, I'll make the most of the distraction by lobbing the goat head over the temple wall which will land right outside the prayer chamber, which is adjacent to Mantu's office. The omen will upset the crooks pretty badly, and off will they go hunting for the sign's meaning and the goddess's missive.

I check the contents of my cloth bag. The goat head is tightly packed in two layers of polythene wrap. Its content in no way will soil the map. The butcher by the highway was hesitant about my order at first. "You don't want any meat?" he asked. "Just the head?" He wanted to know if it meant to be cut in a certain way. But when I said "No" he was left flustered. Being a Muslim fellow, he knows his limitations. He mostly keeps to himself, and restricts his relationship to his customers to the cut of the meat and its quantity. His soft-spoken and non-threatening demeanor makes him the number one butcher of the town. That and the fact that he does not deal in beef.

Because of his secluded character, he does not know who I am or the fact that meat is banned in our house. All I had to do was to choose the right hour of the day to make dealings with him so that a passing devotee wouldn't spot me and come clacking before Mother. The butcher asked me again to clarify: "Do you plan to make some soup?" Then the perfect excuse occurred to me. I said, "It's for the Durga puja next month. The preparations won't start until a goat's head is offered." That shushed him convincingly. I didn't haggle with his asking price. I deposited the money with him in advance with the condition that his son should meet me at the lighthouse by eleven with the parcel. Of course, Sunday works nicely for the butcher too since he will slay two to three goats to meet the demands of his regulars who queues up with their meat bags for their habitual Sunday lunch of goat curry.

Before the sunrise today, I tapped on Kuna's shoulder. He blabbered about the gori before going back to sleep again. It took me several attempts just to penetrate the reminder into his muddled brain that today was the movie day and unless he came with me right away his chance would be gone. Some lazy antics later he finally perked up. As soon as he stashed the map under the pillow I filched it and put it in my bag. The house was quiet and dark, and nobody was up yet. But Kuna wouldn't listen to my insistence to keep quiet. Luckily no one heard us and we walked out as easy as that. We headed in the direction of the sea beach first and waited there until the movie show began. At the house there must have been a panic upon finding that Kuna was missing. On Sundays after I wake up the door to our room is locked from the outside until the Seba session is over. A meal is left behind for Kuna so that upon getting up he can appease his hunger. This precaution was put in place after the whole masturbation debacle in the prayer chamber.

Strangely, Kuna has never protested and broken the door down upon finding himself locked up.

I check the watch and take the map out. I spread it in front of me. A sizable map it is, creased around the edges and tears starting to appear along the fold lines. At the top right corner it says “Archaeological Map of United States of America.” Kuna has told me before: “Don’t let the map fool you. That country never ends.” I remember my geography teacher bringing a globe to class one day and pointing out that America is placed diametrically opposite to India. That fact did not escape me when Kuna would call us at noon our time and it would be close to midnight there. Going to a world which is so opposite to one’s own is to invite disaster. On the map the digging sites are identified with various symbols and accompanying legends. On few of them—barely visible—there are red ink dots. Maybe these are the sites Kuna singled out for his hunt. But before he could check off his list, he was reigned in. Other than the dots, there are no other marks or smudge. He pores over the map every day, tracing invisible routes upon it; his finger so close to the map, yet always in the air. I once told Shama about how maniacally Kuna studies the map like an explorer. “You’re telling me, Cheeku?” he replied. “You think the sea is an open field and you can run anywhere you want to?” He then promptly added: “Your brother should have stayed away from the fair-skinned ladies. They’re full of dark magic.”

I fold the map back and put it inside the bag. No point in tearing it when words are sufficient to convince Kuna. I stifle my temptation to walk past the temple to see what kinds of arrangements are in place. Absence of Kuna would have left the whole brigade tizzy and more than usual number of banars must be guarding the entrance to the temple.

So I will have to leave everything to chance and the intensity of Kuna's rage.

I arrive at the movie theater not too late. Kuna is outside by the paanshop, scratching his beard and protesting to the shopkeeper, who appears fully disinterested. Kuna's fledgling dreadlocks are ruffled worse than a beleaguered porcupine, his left ear is swollen green, and the zipper undone. Mihir, the ticket collector, stands by the grilled entrance to the hall, casting a malevolent glance at me. I wave at him, just to rub it in. It seems obvious that Kuna has caused disruption either by trying to pleasure himself or participate in the on-screen orgy. Lucky for him that the scuffle did not leave him knocked out.

Upon seeing me, Kuna continued his litany of burning the hall down, electrocuting it with some radical equations, invoking Joule's law upon it, deluging it with his piss, and what not. Quite a spectacle he is when he's worked up like that. The loitering teenagers instigate him further. I yank him away from the paanshop. It does not register on him the first time I tell it. I repeat myself, and this time he catches every single word patiently. "My map!" he scowls. His eyes light up, reminding me of his old self, sharp and imbibing. It's like a face resurfacing from hazy and forgotten past. It does not last long though. He shoots off in the direction of the temple, hollering war cries and grabbing a hollow plastic pipe as his weapon. The onlookers guffaw and hoot at the receding sight of him. I too run after him to catch up. The echoes of laughter only compounds further.

I find it impossible to keep up with him. My lungs will burst out I feel. Soon he's out of my sight. The dust that is yet to settle down on the road is the evidence of the force of his charge. Passing by the house, I look around and upon spotting no one I slip the map

over the boundary-wall. When I turn the first bend up the temple knoll, the glimpse of destruction becomes evident. As the road makes a sharp U-turn ahead of me, I spot a sprawled banar on the road past the bend and two others tending to him. They try to detect his pulse. "Get him some water!" I yell at the two imbeciles. "He's breathing," they say in unison, as if that declaration is meant to act as elixir. I keep running. Past the next hairpin, the temple's entrance becomes visible. Quite a gathering blocks the area. The trail of devotees who has hovered past the session hour is treated with the unexpected. Many of them, hailing from out of town, are not even aware that Devaki Devi's divine charisma has a fused circuit to it. Many of them have are perplexed, women have their mouths covered with the corner of their saris and few are conferring cautiously. Two more banars are injured and I see blood gushing from one's head. Right by one of the stalls in the temple compound, discarded clothes can be seen. A smile bursts out on my face: Kuna has gone a step further than I've planned. I don't enter the compound, but I try to go around the boundary-wall so that I can get closer to the prayer chamber. When I turn the corner of the temple wall, to my surprise I spot few banars squatting on the ground, mushed to the wall, hiding for their life. They're startled as much as I am. Their reproachful gaze tells me that they've incriminated me in the whole fiasco. The option of landing the goat head by the prayer chamber is gone now. I retract back to the road. Khalnaik's Ambassador is parked to one side. I slink to the front of it to be able to see beyond its tinted windows. The driver is gone, probably trying to extricate his master from Kuna's hold. I take the head out of the plastic wrapper and sit it facing forward upon the nose of the car. Two open, kohl-black eyes of the goat head seem to relish the oversized, steel wings of the car. What a sign! The goat-headed chariot has

arrived to ferry the thugs to the labyrinths of Yamapuri.

I toss the wrapper and the bag under the car, and join the crowd to watch the spectacle. Khalnaik emerges from the direction of the prayer chamber, stomping his way out like an incensed child. The driver, Mother and Mantu follow him sheepishly. Khalnaik's starched white kurta and pajama reveal slowly the extent of his humiliation. Sweat patches of the size of lake appears under his armpits. One of the kurta buttons is missing, and its stiff collar on one end is torn. Khalnaik's face though appears unharmed; his neat mustache and cleanly shaven jowl beam of the usual affair except for his glasses, whose shade alters under the brightness of daylight. Now, the glass on the right side is entirely missing; it's like a window is left open for the birds to fly in. If Kuna ever deserved to be crowned as the jewel of the family then it's right now.

Khalnaik is in no mood to be appeased as Mother attempts to balm his bruised ego. He has no inkling though that his ordeal is not over yet. When he comes out to the road and witnesses the vandalism havocked upon his car, he demands, "What's this?" His exposed eye waters with anxiety. Next, out of pure helplessness, he lands a smacking slap on his driver. "Mother fucker," he grumbles, "did I tell you to leave the car unattended and come to my aid? Look, what has happened now!"

"Is this also an accident?" he demands, turning to Mother. "What is your design I don't know. But this is not as trivial as you make it to be."

It's Mantu who points me out in the crowd. Mother barks at me as if following his order. "Cheeku! Where have you been? What have you told Kuna about his map? Rascal, I'll flay your skin if you don't give his map back to him!"

I roll my eyes and turn my head away from her. The hand that grabs the scruff of

my neck is so unrelenting that I can't even turn my head. Khalnaik drags me away from the crowd toward the car, rubs my face against the goat head. The hair of the animal is in my nostrils and tongue. Khalnaik's palm is so big he is able to grab me from one ear to another. I slap the goat head away with my cheek as the smell of the dead flesh becomes unbearable. Khalnaik drags me hard upon the bonnet, and my legs are off the ground. I flail them to gain some leverage over him, but his elbow lands like a cement brick in between my shoulder blades. I realize that he's able to pin my back down with the help of just one hand. Like a stuck record he keeps insisting if his opponent paid me to put a goat head there. I deliver a kick on his thigh, but he does not even flinch. Instead, his violence ratchets up. He flips me around on the bonnet of the car. I sense a minor slackening of his grip. As I attempt to escape, he grabs me by the shirt collar. There are Mother and Mantu. Not even an inch they've moved. I don't even spot a sliver of concern...Khalnaik slams me on the metal body and this time the ridge of the bonnet crunches into my backbone like a dagger. There's no time to gasp even, his knee is right upon my groin. The maddening pain in my lower stomach makes me want to shriek, but his hand chokes my throat...He seems bent upon snapping my windpipe. The sun in my eyes leaves me more suffocated.

“Your puny rodent's tail has much life in it, isn't it?” He vomits the insult at me. “I'll clip it today. You won't be left with two able legs and hands to run your mischiefs.” Not even a mumble of protest or entreaty from Mother. Not a sound and my vision goes blind like a collapsing star. “Did you put that goat head?” I keep wishing for Kuna to appear from somewhere and smash his head with a boulder, scrunch it like leeches, son of whore!

“Did you put that goat head or not?” His punch misses the bridge of my nose and catches me on my lips. The warm blood trickles into the back of my throat. “Kuunaaa!” I gasp. “He did it!” He does not relent. I repeat myself through the gargle of saliva and air. “I went searching after...” He sits me upright, grabbing me by my hair. It’s no better. My lips are so badly injured that no word emerges straight.

“Listen, what your son is saying!” says Khalnaik, nodding in Mother’s direction.

“Kuna ... he’s the one ... talking about the goat head. In his sleep, he’s been asking for it for some time. This morning when I woke up ... he was gone. I went searching for him. At the beach ... he was, with the goat head, stolen from the butcher he said. He burned it with the map to get the gori back. I saw the singed flesh.”

Repeat again, asks Khalnaik, and I repeat. “The head singed before me along with the map, and he buried them, their ashes in the sand. Then he went to watch the movie. I waited for him outside the hall and when he came out, I tried to get him home. That’s when he asked me about the map. I said, ‘What map? You burned it, you fool!’ He then started running here. Don’t know why?” I repeat myself again because Khalnaik doesn’t get it. “Go check at the bazaar and under the casuarina groves if you disbelieve me. And then, when I got here I saw the goat head reappear on the bonnet. How he did it, I don’t know. But he’s been blabbering about tantra in his sleep, and been saying that fresh goat blood will bring the gori back. Don’t you believe him about the map. The map is gone. It’s charred in flames.”

Khalnaik let go of my hair and snort at Mother. “This is the doing of your sons,” he warns her, gesticulating his finger. “You figure out how to set this right. Because if I lose the election, then you and your family won’t have a roof over your head or ground

beneath your feet.” Mother and Mantu still haven’t moved. All their compassion and attention seem to be directed at Khalnaik. Bah, to call such cold-hearted opportunists as your family. Khalnaik shoves me off his car as if I were a dead pig, and then he barks at his driver to get going. They leave behind a pile of dust and petrol fumes upon me. From the inside of the temple compound, the cook pleads that Kuna is now in the kitchen, ransacking every aspect of it. Mother pays no heed to his plight. Her eyes are determinedly trained at the empty road ahead of her.

“What’s the point of asking me if you’ve already made up your mind?” demands Father. The agitation has left him with a sweaty forehead. His grip on the edge of the dining table is so tight that the veins on his gaunt fist pop out like green roots.

“I’m not asking for your permission. I’m just informing you,” is Mother’s response.

“And why even bother with such scruples? You’ve acted unilaterally before, without consulting me or discerning right from wrong. All I urge you this time is to reign in your rashness for the sake of your son. But you can’t see it! So single-mindedly perverse you’ve become in your—”

“I didn’t encourage him to go to that uncultured land. I didn’t make him sleep with that whore.”

“And for that hasn’t he paid enough price already? Why do you want more torture and harm for him? In spite of his failure, at least I’m willing to worry about his welfare. That’s what separates you from me.”

Mother's voice does not rise as it usually does when she turns quarrelsome with Father. The fact that she's prepared for a long and fierce fight riles Father further.

"Sixteen months it has been," she says, "since Kuna returned from America. I've kept count of every passing month and watched him ground to dust my stature and dignity. He defiled my prayer chamber; yet, I put up with him. I let him live in this house, enjoy all the comfort and run amok with his mad antics at the risk of eroding my reputation. What do you have to lose after all? But it suits you to question my obligation toward my son?"

"This is not charity, Devaki, like the ones you dole out to your devotees. Your son deserves more. I doubt that Kuna's mind would ever fully recuperate. We are his only hope and his lifelong support."

"Where do you think money for that will come from if he keeps disgracing me before my devotees and driving them away? People like Kuna are shackled to bed posts and are left to rot in the outhouses. My love for him has come at a price. It has only been abused. By Kuna and him!" Mother's finger points at me. I show no qualm, and neither do I avert my gaze. What does she think? Because my lips are sutured and exploding in pain, I'll put up with her accusations like a sheep? She has come to prove today that the death of her own blood is going to tug no chord in her. A woman like her is better born barren than entrusted with offsprings at all. I lower the ice bag upon my mouth to fully meet her gaze.

"Listen," says Father, his voice emerging from strange, quivering depths. "We've argued many times over this. But I always thought I'll be able to persuade you and this day would never come. Don't send him there. You didn't bind him in shackles, I agree. But that's the very future into which you're thrusting him. Asylum is no place for a

fragile man like him. They will strip him off last shred of life and memory. Confinement can rupture the spirit of a criminal. What do you think that will do to your son?”

“No one will lay a finger on him. No one will mistreat him. There are ways that can be arranged. I’ll ask Dulip to use all his influence to put a word of caution in the ears of the hospital authorities.”

“Once again we’re talking of two different things. Kuna’s best chance of recovery lies with his family and psychiatric therapy—”

“What family? The one that uses him for their own amusement. Look at that scoundrel! Not even a hint of remorse he shows. Taking his brother’s map away and provoking him into hooliganism! If I would have opened my mouth and let the truth be told, then Dulip would have killed him. He owes his life to me. But will he show any gratitude?” A volley of savage names are on my tongue; yet, my lips don’t move. The more I try, the more they shoot pain to the core of my brain. So convenient for her to pass the blame on me, isn’t it? I throw the ice bag so hard against the wall that it explodes; a splatter of water and ice crumbs fall out.

“The kitchen stocks are destroyed,” catalogues Mother. “Wooden shelves in Mantu’s office are hacked down. The estimate of destruction is nearly twenty thousand rupees. And when I called Dulip’s house, he didn’t even come to the phone. To unfix the damage they have havocked...”

“Why do you have to punish Kuna for Cheeku’s offense? Send Cheeku away if you want to, but why send an unstable child to a harmful place?”

“I’ve answered your question as far as Kuna is concerned. For Cheeku, I need some time. I need to find out what’s the fitting lesson for him.”

“No, you haven’t answered me anything. You’ve answered only to your loyalists and your self-interest. There’s a way to be discreet. Kuna and I will leave for Cuttack’s psychiatric clinic before dawnbreak and be back by midnight. No one will know. Let’s do this for three or four months. In that way he doesn’t have to leave the house and if at all he doesn’t show any improvement then I’ll agree with your plan.”

“I’ve spoken to the CMO of the government hospital and he has—”

“Devaki, are you listening to me?”

“Kuna staying in this house does not solve the problem. As long as Cheeku is here, Kuna can never be trusted. And I don’t know where to send Cheeku unlike his brother, who at least can be entrusted to someone’s care. At this point if death was an option, then I will take it. I will trade Cheeku to have Kuna here. But no! They are the stark reminders of the price I’ve to pay as their mothers.”

Father sits down on the chair. The voltage is really low tonight. The fluorescent tube has gone dim but hasn’t sunk into flickering. The overhead ceiling fan has slowed down considerably. It makes a shearing noise like sugarcane being peeled of its skin.

“As I was saying, I’ve spoken to the CMO and he has promised that he’ll inquire into few hospitals in Andhra, and let me know soon. He’s promised to keep the matter discreet because his brother-in-law is my devotee. So as soon as he gets back to me, I’ll make up my mind. I’ll ask you to go with Kuna to get him settled there. If you choose not to, then I’ll look for someone else. But he has to leave.”

She gets up and leaves. She’s careful to step across the melting pool of ice on the floor. Not a drop wets her feet.

CHAPTER VIII

NOT SO BAD TO BE CONSTRAINED AFTER ALL: WRITING CONSTRAINTS
AS INVENTION AND REVISION STRATEGIES IN
CREATIVE WRITING CLASSROOMS

In creative writing handbooks or books about the discipline's present and past state in U.S. academia, two words show up often: invention and experimentation. Invention emphasizes the creativity component of "creative writing," whereas experimentation refers to the inquisitive and risk-taking adventure that any creative experiment can be. Many writing advice books emphasize the importance of these two stages in a successful creative writing project. On the other hand, when creative writing is discussed as a discipline, experimentation and invention are cited as examples of what goes on in writing classrooms. In both cases, the two concepts refer to a specific aspect of the writing process. Invention refers to the planning or idea generation process in writing, whereas experimentation refers to revision. Though both of these components are widely viewed as two of the fundamental building blocks of creative writing (or any writing for that matter), considerable challenges exist in implementing them in creative writing classrooms. My claim in this essay is that formalized writing constraints (such as those formulated by the French literary movement Oulipo) can bridge the gap in invention and revising strategies found in traditional creative writing courses.

The Oulipian constraints are formal in nature, and examples include anagram,

palindrome, and lipogram. In Oulipian aesthetics, the content is produced by conforming to the criteria of the constraint. So a predetermined message or theme does not dictate the structure of content as is often the case in conventional narrative practice; rather, the principle of constraint offers the organizing framework in determining the content. I have provided an evidence of Oulipian constraint in the preceding section (the creative section) of this dissertation. The character count of the “Epilogue” chapter is exactly 8,243. This number refers to the official count of the dead in the 1999 super-cyclone in India. This death toll has been a highly contentious figure because many survivors, journalists, and social activists have estimated the toll to be significantly higher. So through the self-imposed constraint of the character limit, I have attempted to give the chapter a narrative structure and imbue it with a political statement. I see the usefulness of writing constraints beyond my personal aesthetics and narrative practice. I see in them pedagogic merit as I experienced firsthand while teaching an intermediate creative writing class in fiction and assigning students writing exercises based on writing constraints. In this essay, I will present data from the said writing course to support my claim of writing constraints as an alternate invention and experimentation strategy.

With the rise in the number of undergraduate creative writing courses and MFA programs in US universities, the creative writing discipline has frequently come under attack from its critics for the lack of intellectualization, one-size-fits-all workshop model, the homogeneous writing output, and the paucity of theory informing pedagogic praxis (Bishop and Starkey 198). Such criticism raises a finger at the invention process, which is concerned with the content and form generating strategies students are learning in the classrooms. In composition studies, invention is often employed as a precursor to any

writing assignment. Students engage in brainstorming, outlining, note-taking, visual clustering, and free writing to generate ideas for topic, focus, thesis statement, and organization. In contrast, creative writing classrooms often lack such an explicit approach to the invention process, for which they have been criticized (Berg 115; Bishop 49-51; Hunley 35-36; Vanderslice, “Workshopping” 151).

Stephanie Vanderslice contends in her essay “Workshopping” that invention strategies are highly desired for the beginning creative writing students in the undergraduate curriculum, where student population is highly diverse as far as writing interest and competence are concerned (152). In fact, the plea that Wendy Bishop made in her influential 1990 book *Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing* about introducing creative writing students to invention strategies through in-class writing activities or the instructor sharing his/her own drafts or discussion on the idea-generation processes is not consistently practiced by creative writing teachers till date (49). Without active invention strategies, the writer courts the risk of uninspired writing or becoming “blocked or avoid writing” (Bishop, *Released Into* 50). Tom Hunley, in his book *Teaching Poetry Writing: A Five-canon Approach*, argues that often the poetry-writing workshops skip the important idea generation or invention process. Instead, the teachers take a product-oriented approach, where they limit their role to giving feedback on a produced draft through the peer-review or the workshop style of critiquing. Hunley writes: “Despite this acknowledgement that invention is key for poets, a vast majority of poetry writing instructors use the workshop model, which, by its very nature, neglects this crucial, variegated issue, focusing entirely on ‘fixing’ finished drafts and leaving poets — even novice poets — to hunt in the dark for their own methods of

generating new poems” (35). According to a personal survey conducted by Dianne Donnelly in 2011 of one hundred and sixty-seven teachers spanning over 174 creative writing programs, she found that 51% of the respondents followed the basic workshop model as their predominant mode of teaching, whereas 39.2% teachers employed a variation of the model (75). Though these statistics do not explicitly speak to the attention given to the invention strategies or the lack thereof, the workshop model’s capacity to reinforce product-oriented learning cannot be ignored. There are two reasons why in creative writing pedagogy (especially at the introductory level) the discussion about the invention strategies is relevant and urgent: 1) the conspicuous absence of these strategies can hinder the student’s potential for creativity; 2) active learning of the invention methods shifts the focus from the written product to the writing process.

Similarly, the revision process becomes a suspect when the creative writing students do not learn concrete experimentation or revision strategies to develop their ideas into diverse and sophisticated narratives. In composition studies, several research findings suggest that students do not usually proceed with active and ambitious revisions when asked to revise their drafts (Butler and Britt 82; Dave and Russell 419). Even when students are told that experimentation will help develop novel themes, a highly focused thesis statement, robust argument, and concise structure, they still limit themselves to minor edits or “fixing.” The same problem can be identified in the creative writing classrooms too (Dethier 2; Leahy, “Who Cares” 15).

Though the group Oulipo set out to create new literary forms through formalized constraints, their systematic exploration of constraints as a valid generative and experimental tool in literature offer significant promise to any serious apprentice of

writing. Oulipians claimed and, to a degree, demonstrated that constraints, as a highly focused heuristic, can make the writer independent of creative muse and diminish the chance of writer's block (Baetens "Doing Things"; Jouet 5). Further in the Oulipian principles, constraints have been offered as an adventure or risk-taking strategy to experiment with writing styles and structures, or engage with writing as "play" (Poucel; Consenstein 232). Even as idealized formulations, writing constraints offer a certain degree of invention and experimentation potential that any conventional creative writing course can benefit from. I am not suggesting that constraint writing should replace the traditional pedagogic practices. In fact, even the Oulipians did not view the constraint-based and the traditional aesthetics as mutually exclusive (Deming 658). I am calling for the constraint-based writing practices to be presented as an option to the writing students *alongside* the more traditional approaches they are taught. By "traditional" or "conventional" pedagogy, I mean assigning writing tasks to students with minimal requirements. For a fiction writing class, this requirement is mostly limited to a page or word limit. Other than that, students are free to select a topic, fiction genre, and style of their preference. As an alternative to such degree of freedom, I am proposing the constraint-based pedagogy, whose focused approach toward invention and experimentation can fill the gaps in the traditional writing models. Also, I am not claiming here the constraint-oriented pedagogy to be a novel approach. In fact, the field of creative writing studies is not devoid of constraints in various learning activities. Poetry writing students are often asked to compose a sonnet or sestina, which has a rigid structural requirement. Wendy Bishop, in the chapter "Ten Inventions and Variations" in her book *Released into Language*, offers invention techniques like "Guided Portraits,"

“Autobiography-Past, Present, and Future,” and “Reversals” that provide writing prompts whose requirements can be closely related to Oulipian constraints. She even goes on to acknowledge the usefulness of the constraints in the invention process by calling the outcome as “directed texts” (75). So in this chapter, my aim is not to claim the constraint-based pedagogy as hitherto untried or untested approach in creative writing classrooms. Instead, I will attempt to theorize constraint as an invention and an experimental device, and offer empirical data of its effectiveness, which have not been fully explored yet.

Further, in the rest of the essay, I will be applying the terms “constrained writing” or “constraint-based writing” interchangeably to refer to the writing executed through a formalized constraint, whereas “unconstrained writing” refers to freely written text or text without constraints³. In the next section, the challenges related to invention and experimentation faced in unconstrained writing situations will be discussed in detail. The section “Oulipo and Constraints” will help to contextualize the inventive and experimental potential of Oulipian constraints or constraints in general. Finally, in the section “Constraints as a Teaching Strategy,” evidence of students’ experience with constraints in an undergraduate creative writing class will be presented to support my claim about constrained writing.

³ It is contestable if any act of writing can be written “freely.” Every act of writing must adhere to linguistic and genre conventions. Such normative rules when internalized by the writer may not constitute constraints, but then they challenge the notion that constraints pose an obstacle to otherwise “freely” expressible ideas. For further discussion on the distinction between normative rules and constraints in writing, refer to the section “Oulipo and Constraints.”

The Invention and Revision

The Invention Process and Its Challenges

Any act of writing raises some basic but crucial questions for the writer: what is he/she trying to say, on what topic, and why? Answering these questions requires extensive thinking on the part of the writer. One aspect of this cognitive effort is the exploration and evaluation of multiple ideas. In the field of composition, this exercise is called the invention process. The notion of “invention” has been discussed since the time of Plato and Aristotle. In the classical rhetoric, it is contentious, however, whether invention refers to discovery or inventing wholly new ideas, and whether the sources of invention reside in the human mind or the world outside. Nevertheless, in contemporary composition studies, invention implies both discovery and invention. Irene Clark defines invention as a “process writers use to search for, discover, create, or ‘invent’ material for a piece of writing” (47). Applying a similar notion to creative writing, Bronwyn Williams phrased invention as a “kind of generative, informal writing where you resist the urge to edit — or censor — yourself and instead just get words on a page” (32). In both of these definitions, the key emphasis is on the exploration or generation of *ideas*, which can potentially constitute a solution in the task of writing. Further, Clark clarifies that invention is not limited to the prewriting stage. In fact, it is distributed across the composition stages of prewriting, writing, and revision.

I will instead distribute the invention process across the end purpose it serves: 1) to find a topic or subject matter in which the writer can intellectually and emotionally invest; and 2) to search for the thematic focus (the thesis/the core purpose) of the text. I will term the first category as *topical invention* and the latter as *thematic invention*.

Though both these invention types are dynamic and interactive, the first tends to be less dynamic than the second. The topic, once chosen by the writer, is less frequently changed compared to the thematic focus. Further, both cases of invention can pose their own set of challenges, depending on the type of discipline, length of the project, its importance, and the career stage in which the writer is stationed.

In creative writing, the invention process can be located in the writer's search for a story idea or in his/her persistent effort to discover the core purpose of his/her narrative. Often, writers are motivated toward certain topics because of personal experiences, ethical values, news events, or other socio-cultural observations. It may become the case that the topic generates enough stimulus for the writer to start a writing project, or when given an assignment, the writer may lean toward a pre-established topic in his/her mind. Though in these instances, the topical invention happens intuitively for the writer, the situation reverses when the writer has the willingness or external pressure to write but with no active topic in mind. Such an instance calls for a conscious search for the topic. A writer then has to employ different invention strategies to develop a topic idea. Clark emphasizes an "active" idea-generation process. Rather than waiting for the inspiration to strike, a writer can take a proactive approach with various idea generation strategies (58). Though such strategies may not yield a quick breakthrough, the assumption is that their multiplicity and frequent application will enhance the chance of successful topical invention. Related invention strategies that have often been advocated and practiced in writing classes are brainstorming, note-taking, journaling, listing, or free writing (Clark 59).

Compared to topical invention, thematic invention is carried out more frequently

by the writers. One creative writing handbook introduces its readers to the concept of theme in the following way: “Theme is that thing beyond our present understanding that we embark on a piece of writing in the hope of discovering” (Herbert 257). Another book suggests: “Telling a story will take you into the heart of the story, and at the heart of the story there will be a theme that you can dig out and crystallize” (Bain 202). Both these quotations distinguish theme from the topic idea, and further, they construct theme as the end product of an invention process rather than something pre-determined. Similar to topical invention, writers employ various strategies like free writing, journaling, outlining, and clustering to carve out the theme of their work (Clark 59). The invention process is an inevitable aspect to any writing task. More often than not it needs to be carried out actively by the writer. The problem arises when the active engagement with the invention process does not yield success for the writer. Such an occasion of stasis may compound to a serious spell of unproductivity or the state called “writer’s block.”

Writer’s block is a highly complex phenomenon and its causal factors have been studied through the lens of various disciplines. In certain cases, writer’s block has been attributed to dispositional traits and psychopathological symptoms, thus suggesting that the remedy for writer’s block lies beyond compositional strategies (Singer and Barrios 228). But when limited to the process of writing, writer’s block can be seen as an idea generation problem. Mike Rose, in his influential work on writer’s block⁴, *Writer’s Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, argues that often the internalized rules and expectations that the writers impose upon themselves can be so inflexible and conflicting that potential ideas are struck down prematurely by the writers. In Rose’s formulation, writer’s block is

⁴ Though Rose’s book is three decades old, some of his findings still hold relevance and are often cited in the discussion about the invention process in composition studies.

a case of a faulty invention process.

As far as the invention strategies are concerned, Rose is skeptical regarding exercises like brainstorming and free writing helping a blocked writer. To quote him in length:

Some current invention strategies like brainstorming and free-writing encourage the student to generate material without constraint. Certainly there are times when such fecund creativity is helpful. But I suspect that the more prescribed a task is, the less effective such freewheeling strategies might be: the student generates a morass of ideas that can lead to more disorder than order, more confusing divergence than clarifying focus. (91)

Rose goes on to call for a more “defined” heuristic as a solution for blocked writers, since it will help with “a focused production of ideas.” Though Rose cautions that a specific and writing-task oriented heuristic may not always work for the writer with a tendency to internalize conventions to a degree of rigidity, his mentioning of disorder tells us about another dimension of writer’s block. That is, writer’s block is not always induced by lack of ideas or over critical handling of them, instead it can also be caused by overwhelming amount of ideas in one’s head. When all the ideas are “vying for attention at once,” the necessity of selecting a single idea can overwhelm the writer (Glatzer 78). So rather than facing the problem of what to say, the writer feels overwhelmed because of not knowing where and how to begin. This sense of “chaos” can paralyze the writer’s creative process because the order or structure within which the writer is trying to frame his/her ideas can prove to be elusive (Adams 48). Cognitive theorists have pointed out that one preliminary

requirement of successful problem-solving is the concretization of one or more aspects of the problem (Rose, “Rigid Rules” 390).

Be it topical or thematic invention, any invention strategy adopted by the writer does take him/her away from the inspiration or muse-based creative process toward an active approach. But the efficacy of the above discussed and predominant invention strategies need to be seriously questioned. They are at best a “freewheeling” approach, and their lack of convergent focus can prolong the duration of the invention exercise and generate an unmanageable array of ideas. Instead, I argue that Rose’s skepticism about the “without constraint” invention strategy is valid. Though for him the constraint is a guiding principle in designing the invention strategy, I argue that the constraint *itself* can be an invention device. A formalized constraint can bring a focus or purpose to the writing task at hand. Though this scenario is different from Rose’s experimental subjects, who are students with an already assigned problem at hand, writing constraints can present more efficiently a story and thematic idea when a writer is searching for both. To put it another way: constrained writing is essentially the opposite of the “freewheeling” approach. Beyond focus, in constrained writing a writer can find inspiration, a challenge, or a much needed stimulus because of the highly localized and specific nature of the writing problem that the constraint poses from the outset and throughout. Put in simplest terms, a constraint-based writing approach has the potential to mitigate writer’s block.

Substantive vs. Limited Revision

Another major challenge in creative writing is posed by revision. As advised by instructors and numerous writing guidebooks, revision or experimentation is offered as

the key to producing quality work. To stay satisfied with the first draft is to straitjacket the potential of a poem or a story. But the challenge is how to undertake revision? Revisions can be divided into two categories as per their scope: limited and substantive. Alteration of aspects like grammar, syntax, and diction, whose implications do not extend beyond the boundaries of a sentence are limited revisions. On the other hand, any revision that has significance extending beyond the immediate sentence level to the broader scheme of the text is substantive in scope. Examples of substantive revisions include reorganizing ideas, reworking the focus, sharpening the logic of narrative, and even something as simple as altering the diction. Of these two types of revision, the substantive one is often recommended to writers in order to reinvent the original idea. In fact, substantive revision is categorized as true experimentation, whereas the surface-level tinkering (no matter how extensive) is characterized as cosmetic makeover. So the issue arises in the writing classroom when the writer construes revision as the fixing of only surface level errors.

The lack of substantive level revisions by beginning writers is a problem common to both creative writing and composition classes. In the latter discipline, the advent of the process approach in 1970s was closely followed by the rising use of word-processing programs in the 1980s (Dave and Russell 407). The file-saving functionality in these programs afforded a pragmatic opportunity for students to generate multiple drafts as was advocated by the process approach. Further, the editing feature like cut and paste gave rise to the hypothesis that students would be able to perform significant revisions of their drafts with ease (Dave and Russell 407). Through the 1980s and 90s, the studies that are conducted on the revision process led to the finding that inexperienced or beginning

writers do not carry out recursive or substantive changes to their drafts (Hayes and Flower 1110; Slattery and Kowalski 75; Sommers 381; Wallace and Hayes 54–55). In recent years, further studies on the revision practices suggested that the trend still has not shifted in favor of substantive revision (Butler and Britt 82; Dave and Russell 419). In spite of a strong preference shown by writing teachers over the years to encourage substantive revisions among students, the recurring trend shows the gap between the intention and practice. So it is not enough to preach to students the merit of experimentation; clearly, students interpret “revision” in a limited sense and/or they lack clear methods to carry out significant revision. For this reason, Jodie Butler and M. Anne Britt have called for an active intervention by the teacher to facilitate the revision process for the students (86).

Similarly, in case of creative writing, radical alteration between drafts is recommended as the inevitable way to producing publishable works. In fact, with the rising professionalization of creative writing in the twentieth century, the rigor of revision became a notable example of the writer’s inclination for self-growth, inquisitiveness, and innovation (Bennett 71–72). But creative writing classrooms too do not fare better in comparison to composition classes as far as substantive revision is concerned. Though this claim cannot be empirically verified in the creative writing discipline because of the lack of such studies, the pedagogic approach of some creative writing teachers suggests active intervention on their part to encourage experimentation among their students.

For example, Anna Leahy in her essay “Who Wants To Be a Nerd? Or How Cognitive Science Changed My Teaching” defers assigning grades to students’ works until the end of the semester to encourage divergent thinking in students so that they can

attempt “invention techniques that open up possibilities and novel ideas” (48). In the essay “Contracts, Radical Revision, Portfolios, and the Risk of Writing,” Wendy Bishop recounts her strategies of deferring grades and contract grading to encourage “risk-taking” among her students (111). She even categorically expects her students to fail in pushing experimentation. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Jena Osman try to impress the notion of experimentation upon their students through interpretation of and critical engagement with other people’s works. Students pick one or two responsive strategies out of a list to modify the original text or limit its textual visibility to transform or reinvent their peer’s work. Subsequently, the responsive strategy that the students use becomes revealing of their own writing practices. DuPlessis and Osman believe that this sort of interaction by one writer with another writer’s work helps him/her with “the means to investigate and articulate what they find most compelling about language itself — and give them license to seek it, read it and write it in a variety of ways” (42). These three pedagogic approaches exemplify untraditional praxis to construct a conducive climate for experimentation. Without such approaches, these teachers are aware that students will find it difficult to carry out substantive revisions by themselves. Constraint-based revision can indeed facilitate an active intervention approach from the teacher. As the examples in the section “Constraint as a Teaching Strategy” allow me to argue, when revised with constraints, there are broader semantic and structural changes that occur to the source text, which can create the opportunity for new insights for the writer.

There are two productivity challenges that creative writing students face: one relates to the need for more focused invention options, and the other concerns the tendency to fall short of substantive revision.

Oulipo and Constraints

Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) is still an active literary movement that started in France in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. The group started as a small set of members from disparate disciplines. A decade later, two primary principles of Oulipo emerged strongly: analysis (an investigation into the traditional innovations in literary form), and synthesis (invention of new forms). The dialectic nature of these two principles are emblematic of the practical stance of many Oulipians. Though they were ambitious to produce new literature, they were also modest enough to admit that their “innovations” may have already been attempted by writers in the past. So to attenuate the often-posed antagonism between tradition and modernism, Le Lionnais would characterize their literary innovations as “plagiarism by anticipation” (“Second Manifesto” 31). But the most conspicuous aspect of Oulipo would become its formal use of constraints. Though these constraints are varied in nature—“mathematical, syntactic, metrical, lexical, ‘lettric,’ semantic”—they have become the common aesthetic principle in the works of the Oulipians (James 109). Some of the most audacious examples of such constrained writing are represented in Georges Perec’s novel *La Disparition* (*A Void*, in English translation, is a 300-page mystery novel written without a single word containing letter “e”) and Raymond Queneau’s “A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems,” where the lines of ten sonnets can be combined in all possible ways to create the mind-boggling number of poems indicated in the title.

In creative writing, a formal constraint is often viewed as an impediment to the free expression or the flow of creativity. But in any genre of writing, the notion of freedom or constraint is only relative. A research paper genre has its own set of

guidelines as far as its language, structure, argumentation, and citation styles are concerned. A sonnet has to conform to a particular rhyme pattern, structure, and thematic organization. But in spite of such limitations, these genres provide ample freedom to writers in terms of topic, theme, and diction. Also, to think that expressivity is most original or creative when given a freehand is not without contention. An argument can be made that in the face of obstacles human beings are compelled to be ingenious and driven. Has that not been the motivation for many scientific and socio-cultural inventions of the human history? Just to cite a couple of examples from modern times: Frank Ghery, the accomplished architect, acknowledges that his iconic creation, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, is the product of a constraint. The highly demanding acoustic standards of the concert hall restricted the shape of its interior, and this constraint guided Ghery's vision of the building's famous steel exterior (Sturt). In his *The New Yorker* article, "Creation Myth," Malcolm Gladwell argues that Apple Computer's innovation of the mouse was motivated by the constraint of affordability and mass usability. Though the concept of a mouse already existed at that time in a pricey and impractical form, Apple, motivated by constraints, reinvented the design to usher in the modern and popular version of the computer mouse.

Oulipo's critics tends to dismiss the constraints as mere "acrobatics and [that they] deserve nothing more than a wry grin, since they could never help to engender truly valid works of art" (Le Lionnais, "Second Manifesto" 30). The Oulipian response to such criticism was to point out the ubiquitous nature of the constraint itself. The very literary production, they would remind us, is subjected to arbitrary, and internal and external sets of conventions. In Oulipo's "First Manifesto," Le Lionnais writes:

Every literary work begins with an inspiration (at least that's what its author suggests) which must accommodate itself as well as possible to a series of constraints and procedures that fit inside each other like Chinese boxes. Constraints of vocabulary and grammar, constraints of the novel (division into chapters, etc.) or of classical tragedy (rule of the three unities), constraints of general versification, constraints of fixed forms (as in the case of the rondeau or the sonnet), etc. (26-27)

Le Lionnais contends, why are the critics of Oulipo blindsided to the constraints that have attained normative status? Why are sonnets and sestinas, in spite of their numerical and formalized constraints, considered to be acceptable, whereas lipogrammatic and pangrammatic constraints are dismissed as acrobatics? So, Oulipo "calls into question the distinction...between the natural rule, which is an acceptable part of literary technique, and the artificial, mannerist constraint. It insists on the arbitrary dimension of even the most time-honored form, such as the sonnet" (James 114). This insight into constraint seriously challenges any assumption that constraint impedes creativity.

The question then arises, is there any distinction between the Oulipian constraint and normative rules? Though the distinction between the two can be slippery, Queneau invokes the principle of arbitrariness to define a formal constraint. He gives the example of Gustave Flaubert's aesthetic principle of not repeating the same word in close sequence. Though this rule has become an aesthetic standard among many writers, it can be converted to an Oulipian constraint when the gap between the repetition is formalized to a specific number like 15, 16, or 17 lines. This number, picked arbitrarily by the writer exemplifies "a constraint that presents an exception and to some extent arbitrary

challenge” (James 114). Warren Motte too, in *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, attempts to clarify the distinction between a rule and an Oulipian constraint by formulating a hierarchy of restraints that any act of textual production must face. Oulipian constraints pose challenge at the “maximal level,” but this difficulty can be fully avoided by the writer if he/she wishes to since constraints have to be taken up voluntarily. On the other hand, rules pose challenge of minimal and intermediary nature, and the writer cannot avoid them without violating normative expectations (11).

Further, Oulipo’s foregrounding of constraints should not be reduced to a contrarian sentiment against the mainstream literary trend. In the eagerness to create new forms of literature, Oulipians did not abandon some of the fundamental building blocks of literature, which many avant-garde movements of the twentieth century have tried to devalue. For example, the Oulipian texts were not meant to be pure objective exercise in form; in fact, they were granted an emotional core, whose importance, though secondary to Oulipians, “should certainly not be overlooked” (Le Lionnais, “Second Manifesto” 30). Secondly, it should not be assumed that the overlay of constraint liberates an Oulipian author from the semantic concerns. Jan Baetens, in his definition of constrained writing, identifies the meaningful access to the text as one of the necessary criteria: “if the exhibition of formal aspects annihilates the meaning and the natural verbal form of the writing, then the constrained text would simply invert (and thus, in a certain way, would copy) the structure of a freely written text” (“Free Writing” 4). So the Oulipians are mindful of the semantic and emotional consequences of their works. A formalized constraint then should not be treated as an anathema to literary production; rather, its role in literature should be viewed diachronically and its capability to produce affect should

be considered seriously.

To return to the topic of constraint as an inventive device, it is time to ask: how can writing constraints influence the invention processes of the writers compared to unconstrained writing? And, how can writing constraints aid the process of revision (or experimentation)? In unconstrained writing, the complacency of permissiveness can withdraw motivation and the impetus to be creative from the writer. Georges Perec considered writing with constraint as a manageable challenge for him compared to the “terror” of writing freely (as cited in Motte 13). Baetens goes as far as to claim that lack of constraints is a “harmful” notion because it produces “dull literature.” For him, exercising maximum freedom is equivalent to “vanishing of the rule,” which results in “repetition or silence” (“Doing Things”). These are, of course, personal preferences, and they do not negate the fact that so much inspiring literature has been produced without formal constraints. Nevertheless, such attitudes bring us closer to comparing the unconstrained writing process with constrained writing.

In case of the topical and thematic invention process like free writing, the search for a larger or abstract purpose can withdraw a sense of challenge for the writer at the lexical, syntactic, and semantic level. In contrast, a writing constraint can be taken up by the writer any time at will. Since the constraint poses a concrete challenge at hand, an immediate purpose to the textual production is established. The sense of purpose that is so intrinsic to constrained writing needs further probing here. For Baetens, the merit of constrained writing lies in how the text can be produced “if need be without any previous ‘idea’ from the writer” (“Free Writing” 2). What can he possibly mean? In the face of it, his characterization of constrained writing does not sound much different from

unconstrained writing. But for Baetens absence of “idea” is not absence of purpose. Since in constrained writing, the constraint acts as the organizing principle of the text, the purpose is identified in the execution of the constraint. So the words generated are no longer random or provisional, but their existence and structural formation now conform to a specific criteria. The writer can draw satisfaction from having produced a solution to a problem at hand. Further, the purpose in constrained writing need not limit itself to the successful execution of constraint, or present itself at the expense of semantic and symbolic outcomes. Jacques Roubaud points out that constraint is “at once principle of the writing of the text, its developmental mechanism, and at the same time the meaning of the text” (as cited in Motte 12). So for Oulipians, constraints are not extraneous to the meaning of the text. In fact, they *are* the theme, they *are* the message of the text. Herein lies the true inventive potential of the constraints, and their ability to counter writer’s block.

Marjorie Perloff, in her book *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, characterizes the constraint as a “generative device,” which “creates a formula structure whose rules of composition are internalized so that the constraint in question is not only a rule but a thematic property of poem as well” (208). This model is most transparently exhibited in Perec’s *La Disparition*, in which the absence of letter “e” from the book signals the theme of disappearance and loss, which mirrors Perec’s personal childhood trauma since he lost both of his parents in World War II. In the article “Reading Georges Perec,” Motte writes: “Perec cannot say the words *père, mère, parents, famille* in his novel, nor can he write the name *Georges Perec*. In short, each ‘void’ in the novel is abundantly furnished with meaning, and each points toward the existential void that

Perec grappled with throughout his youth and early adulthood.” The constraint, in this case, forms a continuum from the executional challenge at the local level to the larger thematic purport of the novel. But then Perec himself confesses that his choice of the lipogrammatic constraint had its origin in a “totally haphazard, touch and go, a flip of a coin” impulse, which, as was executed “word by word, and paragraph by paragraph,” developed into a narrative capable of “symbolic turn” (282). This sort of working process is a typical example of the constraint’s generative potential. A writer can choose a constraint arbitrarily without any prior idea of the thematic purpose of the text he/she is about to generate. The only writing challenge before him/her is the successful execution of the constraint. That in itself justifies the text that is produced. And in this process, a larger theme can emerge, whose start and end will be the constraint itself, or in Perec’s words the theme “totally coinciding” with the constraint. This claim will be further supported in the next section with evidence from students’ works, in which topical and thematic inventions were guided by the very constraint the student self-selected.

So before any writer dismisses the constraint-based writing as unnatural, artificial, acrobatic, or restrictive, the highly convergent focus that the constraint offers must be considered thoughtfully. This focus may not only aid the writer’s invention process, but it may also provide an organizing framework to the writer’s thoughts, emotional energy, and creativity. Oulipo attempts to liberate the writer from the Surrealist automatism and the Romantic era myths like creative genius, “muse,” and innate talent. Constraint is their solution to inspire the writer, give him/her a rigorous challenge, and provide him a highly useful heuristic.

But then Oulipo’s inventive process is not without a paradox of its own. The

claim that constraint is the theme does not preempt the fact that not every thematic, semantic, or symbolic outcome is purposeful in the Oulipian text. There is an incidental aspect to meaning in constrained writing (more so than in unconstrained writing) which cannot be denied. The group's detractors have attacked the lack of semantic intentionality on the writer's part to dismiss the Oulipian works as chance-based or aleatory (James 111). But then this is the criticism Oulipians have steadfastly and unanimously countered by claiming that the constraint-based writing is actually "anti-chance." For them, when a writer takes up a constraint voluntarily and exercises control over the production of the text, the possibility of chance is eliminated.

In spite of Oulipo's opposition to chance, there is a clear dichotomy in their aesthetics of anti-chance: Oulipo's critics have a point when they argue that chance plays a big role in the semantic outcome of constrained writing; on the other hand, Oulipians are not amiss to suggest that constrained writing liberates the writer from the uncertainty of motive and purpose. This dichotomy is astutely explained by Alison James in her theorization of chance. She distinguishes "chance" of the Oulipians from its critics by suggesting that it is a dispute over semantics, i.e. "chance as absence of intention on the one hand, and chance as indeterminism on the other" (111). The anti-chance that Oulipians have professed to practice is more accurately anti-automatism. Since access to the unconscious was the primary source of creativity, inspiration, and truth for the Surrealists, they advocated an unfiltered and automatic writing process. Challenging this psychological automatism, Oulipo proposed constrained writing as a rigorous, conscious, and fruitful alternative. But the role of chance in the Surrealist automatism that the Oulipians so earnestly dismissed plays a vital part in the semantic outcome of their own

works. In spite of this paradox in the Oulipian principle, James argues that the “mechanical” automatism that the Oulipians practice is more prone to discovering new or “potential” literature (119-120). Indeed, a lack of control over the semantic outcome of the text does not put constrained writing in the category of the “freewheeling” invention approach. In fact, this lack is the strength of constrained writing, since focus and control remains at the local and perceptible level for the writer. The constraint limits the number of narrative challenges (theme, message, symbolism, organization, plot, diction, voice, style, etc.) that an unconstrained writer faces to a highly focused problem, thus turning writing into a focused idea generation process.

Another benefit of constraints lies in their ability to facilitate experimentation or substantive revision. The notion of experimentation is deeply encoded in the Oulipian ideals. In its title itself, the word “Potentielle” (potential) speaks of the exploratory mindset that has been the hallmark of the group. The “synthetic” principle of the group outlines its audacious optimism to develop “new possibilities unknown to our predecessors” (Le Lionnais, “First Manifesto” 27). Constraints become the medium to develop new literary structures. But then there is an acknowledgement in the Oulipian philosophy that not every constraint can produce a successful text; rather, the “efficacy of a structure” needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis by a writer. Further, a writer can only come to a definitive conclusion about a constraint’s effectiveness after testing it, which entails trying or experimenting with different constraints. This leads to an attitude of “play for the sake of play” among Oulipians (Poucel).

Risk-taking or play is at the heart of experimentation, where writers write for fun, for exploration, and without the guarantee of success each time. And this is the notion of

play or risk-taking that creative writing teachers like Anna Leahy and Wendy Bishop want to foster in their students by encouraging them not to be afraid of failure and push for substantive revision. But then risk-taking, if left unguided, can be an overwhelming endeavor for a writer, much like the abundance of ideas in case of writer's block. A constraint, on the other hand, can lend focus, structure, or method to the risk-taking adventure. The constraints can also be categorized as "high risk" or "low risk" according to the difficulty they pose, which in turn can provide the writer a clear map to proceed in the experimentation process.

Further, because the types of formal constraints are numerous, a writer's options are limitless too. Queneau would describe Oulipo's repository of constraints as "a whole arsenal in which the poet may pick and choose, whenever he wishes to escape from that which is called inspiration" (as cited in Motte 10). So it is easy to see how constraint, as an inventive device, can be switched to an experimental choice. A draft produced through one constraint can be revised by applying a new constraint, meaning the theme the writer discovered in the first draft can be refined or tested or reinvented using another constraint. No matter the constraint that the writer employs to experiment, the probability of substantive revision is enormous. For example, constraints like N+7 or lipograms which demand lexical changes to a draft will have semantic and rhetorical implications on a larger scale. So what may seem like a local level change can in fact surprise the writer with a new theme, topic, or narrative structure. Further, there are other constraints like the "snowball effect" or sentences of fixed word count, which when used as an experimental device will demand a drastic revision to the draft. So the constraint-based revision can provide the writing teachers an active intervention framework to commit

their students to experimentation. Surely, there will be resistance posed by students on occasions, because of the unconventionality of the constraint. One way to address students' reservations is to shift the grading emphasis from the product to the process, meaning from the artistic and affective merit of the draft produced to the difficulty of the constraint selected by the student and its rigorous application.

The evidence produced in the next section of the students' works demonstrates how constrained writing, as a revising tool, produces substantive revision. The experimentation, of course, does not always lead to satisfactory drafts for the students. But as long as students are graded not on the product but on the process (i.e. their ability to take risks and carry out significant revisions), then an illustrative example is set for the students that experimentation is possible through constraints. When the traditional experimentation strategies do not work for them, they can adopt constraints as an alternate strategy.

Oulipian aesthetics set out to invent new narrative structures, and encourage rigorous and purposeful works of literature. Besides these larger end goals, the group has demonstrated quite impressively the rich invention and experimentation potential of constraints. In fact, Oulipo has shown the path to unshackle writing from the unpredictable aspects of the unconstrained writing process, and to turn the writing and rewriting process more transparent and teachable.

Constraints as a Teaching Strategy

In the preceding section, I have articulated the Oulipian model of constrained writing and its principles of invention and experimentation in creatively-written texts. My

defense of the strategy of constraint as articulated by Oulipian principles is supported by my pedagogical experimentation of such constraints in the classroom.

The data in this case is collected in an Intermediate Creative Writing course in Fiction (Course no. ENG 247.02) that I taught as part of my pedagogy internship in Fall 2012 at Illinois State University (ISU). This is an undergraduate level class, and most of the students taking this class were majoring in English, occasionally with a minor in Writing.

ISU is a public university with the most recent undergraduate enrollment listed as 18,155. Located in Normal, Illinois, the university's setting is urban. 60% of its students hail from the Chicagoland area, whereas slightly less than 20% are from Normal and the surrounding areas. Two other university-wide facts that may help to provide the institutional context for my class are: first, 55% of undergraduate students are female, and second, 20.6% of undergraduate students are identified as minorities, namely "American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or Two or More Race Selections" ("Illinois").

For ENG 247.02, the maximum allowed class size is 18. In my iteration of the course, one student dropped out early in the semester, and one student did not complete the course. Rest of the sixteen students completed all the assignments. So the data pool for the pedagogic evidence comes from sixteen samples of students' writing. Out of these sixteen students, the female to male student ratio is 11-5. The race distribution of the class stands at fifteen white and one African-American student.

As an intermediate level creative writing class, ENG 247.02 is described in the university's official course catalogue as "Workshop in the genre, with critical

examination of its conventions.” This brief description underscores the course’s investment in the craft and aesthetic conventions of a particular creative writing genre. The course also has a prerequisite, which is framed as “grade C or better in ENG 227 or junior/senior standing, or consent of the instructor.” ENG 227 (for English 227) is the introductory level creative writing class, where students obtain a preliminary exposure to major creative writing genres like fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fiction. The other two criteria of the prerequisite indicates that students enrolling to the ENG 247.02 class are required to have a basic level of writing fluency in creative writing and they should be familiar with the standard terminologies relating to a particular genre. In my experience, I have found that most of the sixteen students enrolled for my class had a good command over the mechanics of writing, diction, and narrative craft. Such level of literary ability must be kept in mind in contextualizing the effectiveness of the pedagogic strategies I am presenting here. I am not precluding the possibility that constrained writing may have benefits for students at the introductory level or prior developmental stage of creative writing. But from the data I am about to present, such a conclusion cannot be drawn because the writing students in my class were at an advanced learning stage.

Further, ENG 247.02 provides a greater latitude to the teachers to shape the course according to their own theoretical and scholarly niche. This flexibility allowed me to take an Oulipian-based writing approach to some of the writing assignments. Students were notified on the very first day of the class about my pedagogical approach and its underlying reasons. Under the “Course Description” of my syllabus, a complete copy of which can be found in Appendix A, I have articulated my theoretical investment in this way: “this course is specially designed to help students learn craft of fiction writing

through restraint-oriented writing exercises, which will bring a heightened awareness of various aspects of narrative and their functions, and also, these exercises will challenge and subsequently hone students' creative skills." I have formulated the learning objective of the course in a broader sense here because constraint-based pedagogy is not the only approach I took in this class. Though Oulipian principles influenced the design of this course, I still wanted the traditional writing practices to find a space in my class.

There are two reasons behind this: first, I wanted to introduce writing constraints to students as a writing tool, which would complement unconstrained writing practices that the students would have likely gotten experience of in the introductory creative writing class. So my attempt was to avoid a binary positioning between unconstrained and constrained writing approach. If I would have designed the entire course strictly within the framework of constrained writing, the risk was that I would have pushed students to embrace the aesthetics of Oulipo, a move that would have disregarded students' own aesthetic investments. So in this course, I was conscious to project writing constraints as a tool for students' revision and invention needs, and for students to draw their own conclusions about the benefits of the constrained writing. Further, this approach should not be viewed as reducing writing constraints to mere instruments and divorcing them from the Oulipian context. In fact, James reminds us that Oulipo's "initial goal, as stated in early texts, was not to write Oulipian literature but more modestly to fabricate tools for use by writers and to offer brief illustrations of these tools" (109). So the Oulipian vision was not to limit the use of writing constraints only for the Oulipian aesthetics. Instead, the constraints can be used by any writer to fit his/her creative purpose. By the same token, writing constraints can be used as a pedagogic device in any

creative writing classroom as long as the students are aware of the historic context of constrained writing, which I introduced to students very early in my course.

Second, the juxtaposition of unconstrained writing practices with the constrained writing practices allows students to contrast the two writing approaches and discover each one's merit vis-à-vis another. For example, when students are asked to write one story from an unconstrained approach and then subsequently rewrite it through writing constraints, the comparison helps the writer obtain a measure of his/her own strategic resourcefulness and adaptability under different writing situations. Further, I believe that in a course like mine, the presence of the unconstrained writing opportunity, which is the most prevalent type of writing assignments in the creative writing classes, can help assuage students' anxiety toward the challenges of constrained writing assignments and allow the less experienced writers to ease into them. So for the reasons outlined above, I designed the writing assignments for my course to foreground the complementary relationship between constrained and unconstrained writing.

The same complementary principle can explain my selection of textbooks for the course. The book *By Cunning and Craft: Sound Advice and Practical Wisdom for Fiction Writers* by Peter Selgin as the title suggests is a writing guidebook on narrative craft. I assigned this book to provide students a deeper conceptual understanding of narrative techniques such as characterization, dialogue, point of view, etc. The two other textbooks, *Single Scene Short Stories* and *Flash Fiction Forward*, are anthologies, in which stories are representative of styles of restriction, and students can readily relate restriction to the stories. The *Flash Fiction* anthology demonstrates how an effective story can be narrated within a brief narrative span, in which weaving a scene in the

traditional sense is often not an option. On the other hand, the stories in the *Single Scene* anthology are comprised of only one scene confined to a single spatial or continuous temporal dimension. Though none of the stories in the two anthologies employ formalized constraints, they nevertheless demonstrate that restrictions, whether negotiated consciously or unconsciously, do not impede a writer's creativity.

For the assignments of this course, I undertook the approach of easing the students gradually to constrained writing. The order in which the students tackled the writing assignments are flash fiction, Story #1, Story #2, and revision. My evidence to support constrained writing as a productive inventional and experimental strategy will come from assignments Story #1 and revision respectively. For the purpose of clarity, in the later section of this essay, I label Story #1 as a "self-selected constrained writing exercise" and the revision as a "single-scene revision exercise."

The flash fiction assignment had the maximum allowable word count of 500. So as the first major assignment of the course, students were asked "to become succinct and precise with their plot ideas."⁵ They attempted to fashion an evocative and slice-of-life narrative much in the style of the stories in the *Flash Fiction Forward* textbook but with the added restriction of a required word limit. Students are not new to the word count restriction for assignments in academia. So by posing a similar challenge for the students but in a stricter sense, I tried to prepare them for the next assignment, which was more in tune with constrained writing.

Story #1 was meant to be a 4-5 page short story produced by executing a writing constraint. I shared with students a list of possible constraints: lipogram, acrostics, no

⁵ The full guidelines for the Flash Fiction assignment can be found in the complete syllabus in Appendix A.

adjective, no comma, each sentence being a question, one sentence story, a story with decreasing sentence length (called “snowball effect”), sentences starting with a fixed letter, or no sentence exceeding a fixed word count. A detailed list of these constraints can be found in the guidelines for the assignment, which I have attached under Appendix B. Students were free to take up a constraint outside this list as long as they have obtained my approval. My expectations of the assignment was relayed to students this way: “I am not looking for a clear plot line, moral purpose, or message. If you could give us that under restraint, great! But if not, at least give us something COHERENT, perhaps ABSTRACT, but surely EVOCATIVE.” This instruction was meant to open the possibility for the students to deviate from the conventional storytelling arc. Also, by rendering a full-fledged plot or message optional, I attempted to shift students’ focus and energy to the execution of constraint. In that way, the students were encouraged not to privilege thematic invention prior to generating content, and conversely, the chances were increased for the students to discover theme *in* the constraint itself. This writing exercise was accompanied by a reflection paper, which the students wrote after their stories were workshopped in class. Students were guided to reflect on their stories through five questions, a copy of which is presented under Appendix C.

The reflection paper started out by asking students to excerpt a passage from their story where they thought they did something new, interesting, or different. The second question guided students to reflect upon their selection: “How does this excerpt help you in/prevent you from forwarding the plot of the story and conveying the theme?” The purpose here was to gauge the student’s own assessment of the constraint and its relationship with the theme. The fourth question was on the student’s writing process in

relation to the quoted excerpt, and to make him/her think about the “preparation, execution, and revision” process. The fifth and last question of the reflection paper was a comparison. It asked, “How does this excerpt differ from your natural storytelling style?” Through these reflection questions, I aimed to measure the effectiveness of writing constraints as an invention and revision strategy from the students’ perspectives. This reflection prompt remained same for the revision exercise too.

The third major writing assignment for this course was Story #2, which was an unconstrained writing exercise. The students exercised the freedom to shape the story’s content and form the way they preferred without having to apply any formalized constraint. The page limit for the assignment was set at 7-10 pages. This exercise was very much along the line of a conventional creative writing assignment. Students were made aware during our class discussion that this unconstrained writing situation is an opportunity for them to compare their writing process, techniques, and aesthetics with the preceding constraint-based writing exercise. By juxtaposing Story #1 and Story #2 in close sequence, I hoped to facilitate for students an immediate comparison of their respective invention and experimentation strategies.

The final writing assignment was meant to be a revision of Story #1, where students were required to convert the previously unconstrained story to a single scene narrative. The single scene constraint is not a typical Oulipian constraint. Nevertheless, I assigned it to make a larger point about constrained writing and how students can invent their own constraints to suit their writing project at hand.

The definition of “scene” that I use here is borrowed from Margaret Bishop’s *Single Scene Short Stories*, the assigned anthology textbook for the class. She defines

“scene” as a narrative confined to “one geographical coordinate, or one window of time” (12). But she relaxes this definition to include stories that adhered “to the spirit of the form if not the letter.” So a brief interruption in the timeline and movements within a small geographic space (moving from one room to another) was allowed. In my case, I chose to adopt Bishop’s definition of the scene in a stricter sense, since that would fit the criteria of a constraint. So in a story with multiple settings and timelines, the writer needs to make one variable fixed: either space or time. If one of the variables is already fixed—for example, an action-filled narrative occurring over the course of an hour but divided between three different locations—then the other variable (space in the above example) needs to be fixed too. Lastly, if the story is already in the mold of a single scene both spatially *and* temporally, then I required of the writers to alter the form of the story by breaking the scene down to snippets of different point of views.

In the guidelines to the revision, a copy of which is attached under Appendix D, I outlined the following points:

it does not matter if the revision is successful...[so] what will you be graded on? on your ability to experiment, to disturb the stability of the story you have now, and to try to alter its form radically...what do you need to keep of the older version?: a) the basic premise of the story. b) no new characters can be introduced, but characters can be omitted...what can change?: a) what the characters represent b) what the story is about (the theme) c) voice, time, place.

The initial aspect of the guidelines attempted to shift the grade weight from the quality of the final draft to the process of risk-taking. The latter guidelines were meant to prevent

the writer from substituting the topic of the original story. Further, my rationalization for the single scene constraint was based on narrowing the focus on the story's plot. The readjustment that is demanded of the writer by squeezing the timeline or the spatial coordinates would require what I call "funneling," or in other words economization, compromises, fierce selectiveness, or remapping of the storyline. The aspects of the plot that the writer will lose in the dropped scene(s), he/she will try to regain them or compensate for them in the retained one. If nothing else, then at least the writer will realize the redundant or the less important dimensions of his/her work. The process of "funneling" asserts the notion of substantive revision. Also, it can be an effective experimentation tactic because of the heightened structural, thematic, and technical awareness it brings to one's own work.

Finally, apart from the four writing assignments, students also tackled brief writing exercises from the assigned *The 3 A.M. Epiphany* textbook by Brian Kiteley. These exercises were meant to complement the chapters on narrative elements from *By Cunning and Craft*. The exercises were based on dialogue, description, characterization, point of view, etc. One important aspect of these exercises was that they aimed to challenge the writer by posing a form of situational or creative constraint. For example, the exercise prompt for the dialogue was the following: "Write a conversation between two people who know each other extremely well. The two people are involved in a complex activity, but the conversation should not be about this activity. Show how two people very familiar with one another's way of talking assume a lot, speak in code, don't necessarily listen to each other, and telegraph replies" (91). These exercises were compacted toward the front end of the semester to provide students experience in

challenging writing situations so that they can gradually ease into tackling formalized constraints. One other noteworthy detail in relation to the data is that students' names are changed in the next sections to protect their identities.

Self-Selected Constrained Writing Exercise

One student, Agnes, chose the constraint of starting the first letter of each sentence in alphabetical order; the first sentence started with letter a, second with b, and so on. To Agnes, the most formidable aspect of her constraint was how to use words starting with letter "X's and Z's in a natural way" without calling too much attention to the constraint itself. In this case, Agnes selected the constraint randomly, but she lacked a story idea that can successfully work with the constraint. Agnes recounts in her reflection paper how the constraint guided her topical invention process:

I had originally planned on writing about a therapist and a girl talking about her problems but after trying to start the story multiple times I found myself stuck. I wasn't really interested in them and I couldn't figure out how they would actually talk to each other. That was when I decided to go with something different and I came up with the two girls playing around with the Ouija board. The conversation was so much easier to create then because I could imagine them talking.

The Ouija board premise with its letter grid provides Agnes a credible excuse to incorporate letters like X and Z, as she writes: "It kept the story moving as the characters called out letters that I had difficulty working into the story." This serves as a clear example of the constraint determining the story idea, rather than the writer waiting for

inspiration or conducting freewriting for topical invention. After determining the plot of the story, Agnes made other crucial decisions about her story in the process of executing the constraint. For example, when the planchette starts moving, the characters' interaction with the spirit goes like this:

S...

This thing is picking up speed.

U...

Very weird. What starts with s and u?

X... that's it. Your family sux.

Agnes spells "sucks" as "sux" to meet the criteria of constraint, but to justify this irregularity in spelling, she makes another choice about her character: "a younger person would use and spell in that way." So the deliberate misspelling apart from being a source of mirth comes to determine the character's age and speech pattern.

Apart from the alphabetical constraint, Agnes also chose to narrate the entire story through dialogue. She originally wanted to write a conversation-based story about a therapist and her patient as is quoted earlier. But the constraint may have helped stylize Agnes' dialogue in a particular way as she uses sentence fragments frequently. This not only adds urgency to prose, but also helps with humor and characterization. The opening lines of her story present a distinct prose style:

About time you got here.

Bought candles and some other creepy stuff to set the mood.

Cool. Dead people probably have so much to say. Eternity must get pretty boring after a while.

For sure...

In the first two sentences, “dummy” subject and subject are dropped respectively to conform to the constraint criteria. But this also constitutes a speech pattern that Agnes consistently adheres to throughout the story. This stylistic invention has enormous potential to help Agnes study fluency, prose rhythm, characterization, and voice in dialogue writing. So, the constraint can facilitate an opportunity to practice narrative craft apart from helping with topical and thematic invention.

Agnes’ Ouija board story develops into two young girls having an adventurous and brief interaction with a jocular spirit and it ends with one girl finding out that her dead cat is having a happy afterlife. Though Agnes believes that there “wasn’t a particular theme” to her story, she is at least on the path to discovering one when she writes in her reflection paper: “I think [the story] sounds like two young girls talking about possible dead people in their house.” Agnes’s experience of the constrained writing was positive. Though it challenged her usual writing process, she was heartened to find that her story was not received as woody or stiff by her audience: “Normally I write in a very disjointed way and my stories aren’t so straightforward. I’m glad that people still enjoyed my story because I was afraid it would come across as boring.” In her concluding remark, Agnes writes: “I thought I would have a lot of difficulty with the constraint but I found it easier to write with it. Having guidelines made it easier to figure out what to write. Creating a story from total scratch about whatever I want is going to be a real challenge after this.”

It is anybody’s guess how consistently and productively Agnes will employ constraints in her future writing activities to generate story ideas. But Agnes’s experience

in the above writing assignment should draw our attention to the highly focused heuristics that writing constraints offer, and the constraint's execution can guide the discovery of topic, theme, characterization, voice, and style in a narrative.

Another student Jane realized the theme of her story in the course of negotiating the constraint. Like Agnes, she chose to frame the entire story through dialogue but with the constraint that each sentence will be a question. The challenge for Jane was to render the dialog in a realistic and fluid manner without seeming to strain the prose. Varying the sentence length and prose rhythm were a few options for her. Also, she chose to vary the form of the questions by mixing up between closed, open, indirect, negative, rhetorical, and intonation-based questions. But then this variety was not enough to assuage her doubt that an entire narrative could be sustained through questions. In any narrative, a question that is posed will need to be answered sooner or later. To postpone them indefinitely could expose the artificiality of the constraint.

Jane then decides on the theme of her story to accommodate the constraint. In her reflection paper, she articulates the theme of her story as such: "The girls are asking each other questions but they are not really looking for answers. They are asking the questions more for themselves, and the questions work to get their point across." So self-denial and characters talking past each other became the theme of her story.

Jane develops two female characters, Colleen and Penny, who, though intimate friends, lack candidness with each other and more importantly with themselves. In their conversation at a restaurant, Penny starts posing questions about why she fails to be happy with her current boyfriend, Phil. Even though, by Penny's own admission, she cannot "name a single thing wrong with him," the lack of passion for Phil baffles her.

Colleen on her part attempts to help her friend by probing deeper and pointing out possible flaws in Phil that Penny might be overlooking. But when Penny asks Colleen to explain true love to her, Colleen falters trying to explain it in terms of her own relationship with her boyfriend. She falls back on a clichéd movie reference to further clarify her explanation, which only leaves Penny frustrated and confused. Through these gaps in the two characters' responses, Jane attempts characterization and the movement of plot. Though the story does not develop Colleen's character fully and go further than being merely suggestive of potential relationship problem in her case, it makes Penny confront and acknowledge the true reasons behind her lackluster love life with her boyfriend. So Jane's intended theme materializes concretely for Penny as someone who is in denial, asking questions as an escape, and increasingly realizing through those questions her own conflicts and dishonesty.

Jane, in her reflection paper, talks of a degree of added focus in her writing process because of the presence of the constraint. She writes:

[F]or this story I was much more conscious of what I was writing. I needed to focus on how to get my message across through the form of questions, so each line in this story was a deliberate choice. I think the conscious decision to make each line a question helped me to focus on the voice of each character.

The benefit that Jane attributes to focus aligns with Rose's call for "a focused production of ideas" as a productive invention strategy. In Jane's case, the constraint proved to be a highly purposeful and focused generative experience. Further, Jane's writing process constitutes a departure from her standard writing practice. Usually, she writes

“uninhibited,” exercising less or no control over her first draft, which helps to get “ideas down on paper.” But due to the constraint, she had to adopt a “conscious” writing approach. This shows that constrained writing can push writers to be flexible and embrace new writing processes that they might not otherwise.

Also the constraint allows Jane to experiment with the craft of “voice.” Since she could not use tag lines for dialogue (such as “Penny says” or “Colleen argues”) because that will entail her to end the sentence with a period than a question mark, she has to work on the voices of the characters to ensure that the reader did not confuse the speakers. She writes: “I had to have a clear voice in my head for each of the characters because this piece had no exposition and relied on just the dialogue to tell the story.”

Jane relied on diction, speech styles, and intonation patterns to lend distinctive voices to her characters. The story then turned out to be an exercise in voice for Jane. To give one example of the voices and variety of question patterns in her work:

Penny, if you can’t tell him that you hung out with Brendan by
yourself, what do you think that says about your relationship?

You’re not gonna tell him, are you?

You really think I’d do that to you?

Oh god, how did I get in this mess? What am I supposed to do now?

The first sentence is an indirect question. The second is a tag question, while the third is grammatically not a question but tonally demands information. Such variety makes the dialogue more natural, compelling and typical of each character. For example, Penny is terse and more likely to use open-ended questions, whereas Colleen is more probing, elaborate with her questions, and favorable toward intonation based questions. This

distinction brings more nuance to the characterization. Just like Agnes' experimentation with dialogue, Jane's play of voice serves as a useful experience in narrative craft, which is facilitated in these cases through respective writing constraints.

The above two examples underscore the inventive potential of constrained writing. A topic or theme idea can emerge under the guidance of a constraint. The experiences of Jane and Agnes illustrate Perec's notion of constraint "totally coinciding" with the theme of the story. And because constraints are numerous and a writer can take them up anytime, the possibility of unproductivity or writer's block diminishes significantly. Beyond the larger issues of topic and theme, constraints can help determine other narrative aspects of a work such as characterization, voice, and structure. Further, when used alongside unconstrained writing option, writing students can compare and contrast to learn different writing techniques and gain better control over their writing process through different invention options.

Single-Scene Revision Exercise

There are two issues to this revision assignment that need to be clarified from the outset: first, the single scene constraint was not chosen by the students themselves like the previous assignment; rather, it was imposed by me, the teacher, who is in a position of authority. This is not an ideal scenario. Baetens emphasizes the importance of "free" constraint: "a constraint rapidly becomes a burden if it is imposed in an authoritarian way" ("Doing Things"). In spite of this, my decision to assign a common constraint to the whole class was aimed at diversifying students' experience with constraints, i.e. a self-selected constraint vis-à-vis an externally imposed constraint. Second, the constraint did

not lead to satisfactory experiences in all the cases. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with their revised products and wished to return to their original draft, which was the unconstrained writing assignment (Story #2). One factor for this dissatisfaction could be the imposition of constraint. Nevertheless, my hope is that the student took the constraint-based revision as a risk-taking endeavor and an engagement with a process-based approach to writing. Further, my hope is that they took the constraint as a tool in their “arsenal” alongside other unconstrained approaches. So these two factors must be kept in mind when judging the effectiveness of the single-scene revision presented next.

For Ashley, the revision saw a significant change in the focus of her story and thus lead to exploring new potential. The premise of Ashley’s story is about two ex-lovers who meet each other by chance at a party. Whereas the male character (Jasper) is driven by old passion and desire, the female character (Brett) who is engaged now is reminded of Jasper’s aggressive side. In the first draft (i.e. the unconstrained version of the story), the party is hosted by Jasper at his lavish mansion. He is portrayed as a very successful lawyer and presumptuous in his social skills. Brett, who is uninformed about the host of the party, arrives there on the insistence of a friend. The original version of the story had an omniscient point of view. So the reader has access to both Jasper and Brett’s perspectives. Jasper, upon meeting his ex-girlfriend, responds in his habitual cajolery, but when he finds out that Brett is committed to another man, he moves in aggressively:

“You’re married?” he asked quietly. Brett raised her left hand to show him her diamond, her promise to Byron.

“I’m engaged,” Brett answered and shrugged.

Jasper's green eyes sparked back to life and Brett furrowed her brow at his expression.

"Engaged isn't married," Jasper said and Brett sighed at Jasper, shaking her head.

"It is, Jasper." Brett set her glass down on a ledge and wiped her hands together as if wrapping something up. "It was nice to see you," she whispered and looked up at him from beneath her lashes. His dapper suit, his glossy black hair, his glowing green eyes were not going to drown her. She would not fall victim to Jasper again. She had done that her entire life. Byron loved her ... Byron loved her.

Brett leaves the party in a rush. Though Jasper tried to follow her, he was detained by another party guest. With these final lines: "Jasper watched her go from the patio of his house. This time she wasn't crying," the story offers a neat resolution. Brett has made up her mind and she would not fall for Jasper's antics again.

In the revision, Ashley moves toward complex characterization and an open-ended conclusion. The original draft had two scenes. Even though the story is narrated over a continuous time, there are two physical settings: first, at the car between Brett and her friend; second, at Jasper's house. As Ashley applies the constraint of a single scene to her story, her first concern is to confine the characters to a single spot. She writes in the reflection paper:

First I needed to think of a place that I could put Brett and Jasper in but not have them be alone. I also wanted to introduce some conflict besides

whatever was going on between Brett and Jasper so I thought that introducing Byron to the story would make for an interesting twist.

Ashley's decision to introduce Byron (Brett's fiancé) in the revised draft flouts the revision guideline, which requires that no new character can be introduced. Further, why Ashley feels the need to add more conflict besides the central one between Jasper and Brett is not fully articulated in the reflection paper. It may seem that her decision is instinctive. But one criterion though she repeats several times is that of the single scene restraint. For example, about paralleling Jasper vs. Brett's conflict with Jasper vs. Byron's, Ashley writes about these double conflicts as "something that I wanted to make more clear [sic] to the reader in one single scene." So to be clear, Ashley does not explicitly state that the constraint of a single scene led to her move toward multiplying conflicts in the story. Nevertheless, her reflection paper provides clear evidence that she was concerned about how her narrative strategies would fare within the single scene constraint.

Ashley makes another change by shifting the point of view from omniscient to Jasper's subjective perspective. She chooses Jasper because she "wanted to give a peek into his side of the relationship in this story," which was absent in her first attempt. This is an interesting shift because now she wants Jasper to look a bit "redeemable," less of a "bad guy" compared to the original draft.

Ashley moves the setting of the story in the revision to a restaurant, where Brett and her friend are having dinner. The timeline is also a follow-up of Brett's encounter with Jasper at the party. So having been smitten and rejected by Brett, Jasper arrives at the restaurant "dishevelled, unshaven and drunk," to win Brett back. The change in

physical setting, multiplying of conflict and shift in point of view also brings forth a change in the theme. Ashley reflects:

In the first story, Brett and Jasper are not confined to a single space and there is really also no competition for Jasper. He had Brett all to himself, not to mention, the upper hand. It was his house, his party, and his friends. Now, it is Brett's territory that Jasper has intruded upon. This way, by introducing the character of Byron to the story the theme changes. It is now more about love lost or unrequited love.

Indeed, in the first draft Jasper was a past love and a negative intrusion, who served to solidify focus on Brett and her resolve to hold on to the present. But in the revised version, the focus is on Jasper. He is the protagonist and psychologically a complex rendition, more so than Brett in the first version. After encountering Byron at the restaurant, Jasper realizes he is no match to his adversary and that Brett is content with her fiancé. This stinging rejection and humiliation does make Jasper look sympathetic, but his conflicted nature re-emerges through these last lines: "In that instant, with the burning pain of Brett's eyes on his skin and the picture of Byron's lips on hers, Jasper knew he fought a losing battle, but fight he would." The story thus enters a new aesthetic complexity compared to its earlier incarnation because of the open-ended conclusion and evocation of Jasper's pathetic obstinacy, which is on one hand disturbing and on the other pitiable.

Ashley's revision puts her in an advantageous position. I am not claiming that her revised draft is qualitatively any better than the first draft or that her process of exploration is complete by any means. But she simply did not re-write her first draft;

rather, she extended her story idea further in the process of restricting her characters to a single physical setting. With it, she discovered new possibilities, craft-wise and thematically. Irrespective of whether Ashley continues working with her new draft or returns to the original one, at least she now has a broader vision of her plot and characters to improvise on. There is a possibility that Ashley would have embarked on this level of exploration on her own or an instructor's simple call for significant revision might have produced similar results. But constraint-based experimentation transfers those odds to a concrete framework, which compels as well as guides the writer to freshly align or reinvent the initial locus of emotional energy and thematic purpose.

Another student, Erin, found that the constraint of single scene seriously undermined her ability to make an emotional impact on her readers. She claimed that the emotional richness of her characters suffered as a result. She opens her reflection paper with these words: "In the original piece, I think I was able to garner more emotional attachment for my lead character. The original focuses much more on Pamela's emotions and feelings, it's more chaotic as well, but I thought that worked for the story." At the heart of Erin's original story is the character Pamela Rasmussen, "the last remaining commander of an anti-zombie force," who gets bitten by a zombie and now must suffer from five stages of "necrofying" process before death. In spite of her imminent doom, Pamela manages to get close to the Zombie Queen and eliminates her to save the mankind. Pamela's valiance and tragic fate are emotionally important to Erin.

But for the revision, Erin realized she had limitations to developing Pamela's characterization:

Early into the process I realized I would have to cut the necrofying process that had shaped the original. In keeping it to one scene I didn't feel that that was a viable option. I didn't think they'd be able to go through forty-eight hours without being caught and with then executing the story in a much shorter time line I didn't feel like I could properly display each of the stages.

So single scene constraint compelled Erin to forgo the five stages of necrofying, which made her rethink the affective trajectory for her story. Erin came to the conclusion that the sentimental aspect of the character can no longer be conveyed adequately through one scene. Hence, she decided to go "with the more stereotypical action based zombie story in the revision."

Interestingly, what Erin deems as "stereotypical" has a novel aspect to it. She does something that she likely would not have attempted otherwise: "I also decided to add some humor into the end of the revision. Once I realized that it would be a lighter piece in general I wanted to end it on a funny note which would have been entirely inappropriate in the original." Humor is the novelty here, a comic relief in an otherwise emotionally heavy story. In fact, humor has something to offer here that may separate the narrative from the predictability of zombie trope; hence, its potential is worth considering. While the first draft's ending has a sentimental note to it and it functions as a eulogy to Pamela's sacrifice, the second draft culminates in a radically different mood. Pamela is able to survive the zombie bite and kill the queen. Her triumph is registered as such: "My gaze catches on the body of the girl I'd partially eaten. Yup I'll be throwing

that up shortly. I'll deal with the emotional scarring someday that is not today. Today I need something alcoholic."

Because Erin is so invested in the tragic quality of the story, she sees humor as an "inappropriate" digression or a serious compromise rather than considering it a shift facilitated through experimentation. Erin does not have to make her story funny but her lack of realization that something *new* happened in the revision could be the result of the inadequacy of the reflection paper questionnaire, or a lack of post-revision dialogue with her teacher and peers since this was the end-of-semester assignment. Further, her impression of the revised draft can be captured in these final words: "Overall I'm not sure how much further work I'd put into this revision whereas I'm eager to work with my original piece and see what I can do as far as expanding it and working with it."

My hope is that even if Erin decides to give up on her revised draft, which is perfectly understandable and acceptable, that she at least views constraint-based experimentation as a legitimate option. But then it is worth acknowledging that constraints do not have to appeal to everyone's experimentation strategies for every writing task. Some writers are highly capable of undertaking extensive revisions on their own through conventional revision methods without having to be externally motivated and challenged through constraints. Further, in a creative writing course, a teacher's priority should be to introduce students to new writing tools, and constraint-based invention and experimentation assignments can help to that purpose. In the above two instances of revision, it is evident that constraint-oriented revision strategy provided a compelling focal point for extensive revision. This strategy may not always be successful in the sense of winning students' minds about the process of experimentation, but it can

help the teacher illustrate to his/her students the methods of risk-taking and “play for the sake of play” in creative writing. Beyond a teacher’s well-meaning intentions and call for substantial revisions, constraint-based pedagogy goes a step further. It provides the teacher with practical and concrete tools to demonstrate what it means to experiment in writing.

Conclusion

Creative writing teachers are often guilty of relying heavily on “freewheeling” and open-ended invention or experimentation strategies in writing classrooms. To ask students to produce a story or to revise may seem like a straightforward learning requirement, but this is not a strategy in itself. Ambitious students are left on their own to invent and to revise when the most their teachers are willing to offer is critical feedback *only after* the work is produced. This product-centric learning model has very limited success against the challenges of writer’s block and substantive revision. So in the creative writing classes (especially at the introductory level), a huge disservice is done to the students when they are taught various narrative elements (characterization, dialogue, plot, etc.) but no productive strategy on how to experiment with and invent these elements.

For the classes where teachers make a conscious effort to move away from a product-centric learning model to process-oriented teaching, constraints can help to diversify pedagogic strategies. Usually, the writing prompts the teachers assign to help students generate story ideas can acquire a heightened level of rigor and focus through constraints. While most of these writing prompts are meant to provide students with a

starting point or a “warm up” in their generative process, constraints have more enduring presence. Because a constraint becomes the underlying principle that coheres the text, there is potential for the writer to be more invested in the work produced. Whereas most of the writing prompts provide the writers ample room to develop their ideas off the challenge posed by the prompt, constraints curtail that freedom and compel the writer to stay true to a singular challenge throughout. The intensity of the constraint is perhaps one reason why thematic or topical invention can become a seamless extension to the constraint, as were the cases with Agnes and Jane. On the other hand, constraints can be a highly effective and concrete experimentation strategy alongside the measures teachers take to make a case for substantive revision. Constraints provide a focused framework to carry out experimentation, take risks, and engage in “play.” Even if the constraint the student employs to revise his/her draft does not produce satisfactory results, it is the failure of the product and not the process. For a teacher, trying to impart a process-based learning upon his/her students, constraints can prove to be highly productive and engaging.

Students’ experiences with constrained writing presented in the previous section constitute a strong preliminary finding to merit further research and empirical studies on the constructive impact of constraints in creative writing courses. The most remarkable aspect of constraints is their ability to present a concrete and highly localized challenge to the writer, who can temporarily ignore slippery issues of inspiration, message, audience expectations, talent, and creativity. Instead, the writer can focus on producing text through a rigorous and challenging process. Moreover, the text produced through such a process need not be a mere quota to an explorative purpose or some acrobatic feat to

flaunt. In fact, it can be an ambitious experiment in initiating writers on an affective and purposeful path to producing literary works of merit.

REFERENCES

- Adams, James L. *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Pub., 2001. Print.
- Altes, Liesbeth Korthals. "Irony." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan. Routledge, 2010. 261–263. Print.
- Baetens, Jan. "Doing Things That Don't Come Naturally. A Plea for Constrained Writing." *Drunken Boat* 8 (2006): n. pag.
- . "Free Writing, Constrained Writing: The Ideology of Form." *Poetics Today* 18.1 (1997): 1–14. Print.
- Bain, Terry. "Theme: So What's Your Story Really About?" *Writing Fiction: The Practical Guide from New York's Acclaimed Creative Writing School*. Ed. Alexander Steele. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003. 195–212. Print.
- Beck, Evelyn Torton. *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater, Its Impact on His Work*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1971. Print.
- Beecher, Donald. "Suspense." *Philosophy and Literature* 31.2 (2007): 255–279. Print.
- Bennett, Eric. "A Shaggy Beast from a Baggy Monster." *New Writing* 9.1 (2012): 68–84. Print.
- Berg, Danita. "Invention in Creative Writing: Explorations of the Self and the Social in Creative Genres." *Creative Composition: Inspiration and Techniques for Writing Instruction*. Eds. Danita Berg, and Lori A. May. Multilingual Matters, 2015. 114–128. Print. New Writing Viewpoints.
- Binder, Hartmut. "The Metamorphosis: The Long Journey into Print." *The Metamorphosis*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996. Print.

Bishop, Margaret. *Single Scene: Short Stories*. Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2007. Print.

Bishop, Wendy. "Contracts, Radical Revision, Portfolios, and the Risk of Writing." *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*. Ed. Anna Leahy. Multilingual Matters, 2005. 109–120. Print. New Writing Viewpoints.

---. *Released Into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing*. NCTE: Urbana, 1990. Print.

Bishop, Wendy, and David Starkey. *Keywords in Creative Writing*. Utah State University Press, 2006. Print.

Brewer, William F. "The Nature of Narrative Suspense and the Problem of Rereading." *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jürgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 107-127. Print.

Butler, Jodie A, and M Anne Britt. "Investigating Instruction for Improving Revision of Argumentative Essays." *Written Communication* 28.1 (2011): 70–96. Print.

Carroll, Noël. "The Paradox of Suspense." *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jürgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 71-91. Print.

Chanady, Amaryll. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*. Garland Publishing, Incorporated, 1985. Print. Garland Publications in Comparative Literature.

Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press, 1980. Print.

Clark, Irene L. "Invention." *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing*. Ed. Irene L Clark. Routledge, 2011. Print.

Consenstein, Peter. *Literary Memory, Consciousness, and the Group Oulipo*. Rodopi, 2002. Print.

- Corngold, Stanley. "Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: Metamorphosis of the Metaphor." *The Metamorphosis*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996. Print.
- . *The Commentators' Despair: The Interpretation of Kafka's Metamorphosis*. Kennikat Press, 1973. Print. Kennikat Press National University Publications.
- Dave, Anish M, and David R Russell. "Drafting and Revision Using Word Processing by Undergraduate Student Writers: Changing Conceptions and Practices." *Research in the Teaching of English* 44.4 (2010): 406–434. Print.
- Deming, Richard. "Constraints as Opposed to What?: A Philosophical Approach to the Values of Constrained Writing." *Poetics Today* 30.4 (2009): 653–668. Print.
- Derry, Charles. *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1988. Print.
- Dethier, Brock. "Revising Attitudes." *Acts of Revision: A Guide for Writers*. Ed. Wendy Bishop. Heinemann, 2004. 1–11. Print.
- Deveny, John J, Jr., and Juan Manuel Marcos. "Women and Society in One Hundred Years of Solitude." *One Hundred Years of Solitude - Gabriel Garcia Marquez*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Infobase Publishing, 2009. 37–47. Print.
- De Wied, Minet, and Dolf Zillmann. "The Utility of Various Research Approaches in the Empirical Exploration of Suspenseful Drama." *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jürgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 255-282. Print.
- Donnelly, Dianne. *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic*. Multilingual Matters, 2011. Print.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Jena Osman. "Creative Writing and Creative Reading in the Poetry Workshop." *Teaching Creative Writing*. Ed. Heather Beck. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 37–43. Print.
- Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004. Print.

Gladwell, Malcolm. "Creation Myth." *The New Yorker*. Condé Nast, 16 May 2011. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.

Glatzer, Jenna. *Outwitting Writer's Block and Other Problems of the Pen*. Guilford, CT: Lyons, 2003. Print.

Hart, Stephen M. "Superstition, Irony, Themes." *Critical Insights: Gabriel Garcia Marquez*. Ed. Ilan Stavans. Salem Press, 2010. 233–247. Print.

Hayes, John R, and Linda S Flower. "Writing Research and the Writer." *The American psychologist* 41.10 (1986): 1106. Print.

Herbert, W. N. "Theme." *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings*. Ed. Linda Anderson. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. 255-69. Print.

Higgins, James. "Gabriel García Márquez: Cien Años de Soledad." *Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Casebook*. Ed. Gene H Bell-Villada. Oxford University Press, 2002. 33–52. Print.

Hume, David. "An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding." *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*. Ed. Michael Huemer. Routledge, 2002. 298–310. Print. Routledge Contemporary Readings in Philosophy.

Hunley, Tom C. *Teaching Poetry Writing: A Five-canon Approach*. Multilingual Matters, 2007. Print.

"Illinois State At a Glance." Illinois State University, n.d. Web. 7 Mar. 2015.

James, Alison. *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo*. Northwestern University Press, 2009. Print. Avant-Garde & Modernism Studies.

Jouet, Jacques. "With (and Without) Constraints." Trans. Roxanne Lapidus. *SubStance* 30.3 (2001): 4–16. Print.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis: Translation, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*. Trans. Stanley Corngold. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. Print.

Kiteley, Brian. *The 3 A.m. Epiphany: Uncommon Writing Exercises That Transform Your Fiction*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest, 2005. Print.

Leahy, Anna. "Who Cares - and How: The Value and Cost of Nurturing." *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*. Ed. Anna Leahy. Multilingual Matters, 2005. 13–25. Print. New Writing Viewpoints.

---. "Who Wants To Be a Nerd? Or How Cognitive Science Changed My Teaching." *New Writing* 7.1 (2010): 45–52. Print.

Le Lionnais, François. "Lipo: First Manifesto." *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*. Ed. Warren F. Motte. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998. 26-28. Print.

---. "Second Manifesto." *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*. Ed. Warren F. Motte. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998. 29-31. Print.

Levine, Caroline. *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt*. University of Virginia Press, 2003. Print.

Márquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. HarperCollins, 2006. Print.

Martin, Pete. "I call on Alfred Hitchcock." *The Saturday Evening Post* 27 July 1957: 36-37 & 71-73. Print.

Mikos, Lothar. "The Experience of Suspense: Between Fear and Pleasure." *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Ed. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jürgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen. Routledge, 1996. 37–49. Print.

Motte, Warren F. *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998. Print. Dalkey Archive Paperbacks.

---. "Reading Georges Perec." *Context*. Dalkey Archive Press, n.d. Web. 08 June 2015.

Perec, Georges. *A Void*. Trans. Gilbert Adair. Boston: David R. Godine, 2005. Print.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. University of Alabama Press,

2004. Print.

Porter Abbott, H. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.

Poucel, Jean-Jacques. "Oulipo: Explore, Expose, X-Po." *Drunken Boat* 8 (2006): n. pag.

Rose, Mike. "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block." *College Composition and Communication* 31.4 (1980): 389-401. Print.

---. *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2009. Print.

Rozin, Paul, and Edward B Royzman. "Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion." *Personality and social psychology review: an official journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc* 5.4 (2001): 296–320. Print.

Sanderson, Catherine A. *Social Psychology*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. Print.

Singer, Jerome L, and Michael V Barrios. "Writer's Block and Blocked Writers: Using Natural Imagery to Enhance Creativity." *The Psychology of Creative Writing*. Ed. James C Kaufman and Scott Barry Kaufman. Cambridge University Press, 2009. 225–246. Print.

Slattery, Patrick J, and Rosemary Kowalski. "On Screen: The Composing Processes of First-Year and Upper-Level College Students." *Computers and Composition* 15.1 (1998): 61–81. Print.

Sokel, Walter Herbert. *The Myth of Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka*. Wayne State University Press, 2002. Print.

Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication* 31.4 (1980): 378–388. Print.

Sternberg, Meir. *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 1993. Print.

Sturt, David. "Creativity: How Constraints Drive Genius." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 12 July 2013. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.

Tan, Ed, and Gijsbert Diteweg. "Suspense, Predictive Inference, and Emotion in Film Viewing." *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jürgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 149-188. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cornell University Press, 1975. Print.

Vanderslice, Stephanie. "Workshopping." *Teaching Creative Writing*. Ed. Graeme Harper. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006. 147–157. Print.

Vorderer, Peter. "Towards a Psychological Theory of Suspense." *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jürgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 233-254. Print.

Wallace, David L, and John R Hayes. "Redefining Revision for Freshmen." *Research in the Teaching of English* 25.2 (1991): 54–66. Print.

Williams, Bronwyn T. "Writing Creative Nonfiction." *A Companion to Creative Writing*. Ed. Graeme Harper. John Wiley & Sons, 2013. 24–39. Print.

Zillmann, Dolf. "The Logic of Suspense and Mystery." *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes*. Eds. Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991. Print.

Zillman, Dolf. "The Psychology of Suspense in Dramatic Exposition." *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jürgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 199-231. Print.

APPENDIX A

SYLLABUS FOR ENG 247.02: INTERMEDIATE CREATIVE WRITING

FICTION (FALL 2012)

Instructor Contact Information

Shailen Mishra

Office: Stevenson 201J

Office hours: 2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday

Email: smishr2@ilstu.edu

Class Information

Classroom – Williams 21

Class Hours - TR 12:35-1:50 pm

Course Description

This will be an intermediate creative writing course in fiction. Students will explore, learn and practice essential techniques in fiction genre.

The assigned textbooks will help develop students' aesthetics, critical thinking, and craft-related acumen in the genre. Further, the writings of published authors will serve as examples, which students will closely study and interpret with the assumption that such critical engagement will be replicated in students' own writing. There will be regular class discussion of assigned readings and students will be expected to share their opinions and observations, which by the way are not optional in this class. You must have an opinion. You must take a stance. Not being able to make up your mind about a story is okay as long as you can articulate why the story gives you mixed feelings. Finally, students will put their creative and critical skills to task, and write stories of different lengths. So expect this to be a reading and writing intensive course.

Also, this course is specially designed to help students learn craft of fiction writing through restraint-oriented writing exercises, which will bring a heightened awareness of various aspects of narrative and their functions, and also these exercises will challenge and subsequently hone students' creative skills.

Required Text

(CC) *By Cunning and Craft: Sound Advice and Practical Wisdom for Fiction Writers* by Peter Selgin (\$4*)

(AM) *The 3 A.M. Epiphany: Uncommon Writing Exercises that Transform Your Fiction* by Brian Kiteley (\$11)

(SS) *Single Scene Short Stories* edited by Margaret Bishop (\$6)

(3F) *Flash Fiction Forward* edited by James Thomas & Robert Shapard (\$11)

(DR) Digital Reserve: access through dept. website and my folder**

*the prices are as listed in Amazon for a new copy.

the story will be available in pdf format and **students MUST bring printed copies to class.

You can't refer to digital copies in your laptop during discussion hour.

Course Expectations

I believe that each student enrolled in this class carries the ambition to become a writer. So please keep in mind that for the rest of the semester I will treat you as an aspiring writer i.e. an artist in the making. I have designed this course to encourage that ambition and in return I expect the following from you:

- 1) display energy or passion for your work;
- 2) be prepared to critically and intellectually engage with your writing, that of your peers and the assigned texts;
- 3) be aware of the purpose your writing serves;
- 4) expand your literary taste after reading works of different authors and then evaluate your own work by equally high aesthetic standards; and
- 5) be prepared to question the ideological, cultural, historical and political context within which your text is produced and so that of other writers'.

Grading

Attendance, and class participation	20%
Critique of peers' work	15%
In-class Writing exercises	15%
Flash fiction	10%
Story #1 (restricted)	15%
Story #2 (free or multiple scenes)	15%
Revision (revise Story #2 to single scene)	10%

These percentages in combination will decide your final grade. Also, keep in mind the subjective nature of this class, meaning the teacher is not entirely free of his own *biases with certain artistic styles and tastes*. I will provide you rubrics before we begin workshopping your stories and the criteria for evaluation will look something like this: technique/craft (25%), aesthetic appeal (25%), critical thinking (25%), and overall effect (25%). This distribution scheme should serve as a pointer and your grade will involve some approximation and generalization by me. For example, "effect" has the final word in such subjective terrain, meaning what is that *new, exciting* thing that your writing does which makes your reader pause, think, and re-see something in a way like never before.

What do we mean by "new" and "exciting"? We'll try to solve that puzzle throughout the semester.

Also, during the semester if you ever have concerns regarding your performance in the class then do not hesitate to visit me during the office hours or schedule an appointment.

Note: Coming unprepared to the class, having several unexcused absences in a row or failing to turn in assignments on time will have a negative impact on your overall grade.

Deliverables

Flash Fiction	Under 500 words
Story #1	4-5 pages
Story #2	7-10 pages
Revision	Flexible page limit

Assignments

Flash Fiction: This exercise will require students to become succinct and precise with their plot ideas. Young writers are usually overambitious in their plot ideas: they often want to write about something drastic, and life/world-changing. Such ambitions distract students from enjoying and learning the finer aspects of the narrative. A story could be about an image, a tiny moment, or a gesture, *in which* could be packed a profound idea or symbol. Matured fiction is often made of such aesthetics. Attempt a story as in your textbook *Flash Fiction Forward*. Word limit: 500.

Story #1: After flash fiction, students will write a story 4-5 pages long with self-imposed restrictions. For example, a student may decide to write the whole story through dialogue. Another may choose to write a story in which none of the words start with letter “e,” or even more ambitious, none of the words will contain the letter “e.” **Get my approval beforehand of the constraint you’re applying before you write the story.**

Story #2: This is the longest exercise that the students will write in this class. This will be an open-ended exercise i.e. students are free to write the story *the way* they want to. After exercising full freedom, students will have the chance to compare this experience with restricted writing situation. I believe such comparison is necessary to develop a greater sensibility towards craft. So no technical restriction and page limit 7-10 pages.

Revision: For their revision, students will be asked to convert story #2 into a single scene story. What constitutes as a “scene” is defined in the textbook *Single Scene Short Stories* as “a brief break in time is allowable, a framed story is acceptable, a meandering about within a small physical space, such as from one room to another in the same house, came to seem suitable” (12). So the physical setting does not have to stay fixed, and time does not have to remain continuous either. From such understanding of scene, students will shape and modify their previous draft into a single scene story. The page limit for the revised draft will be flexible. **But the challenge is to be able to convey the same premise of the story (not necessarily the same message) in a single scene.** Such constraint will demand that students make the most versatile use of characterization, description, dialogue, narrative structure, etc. Students will reflect on all of these aspects in a **reflection paper** they will submit with the revision. They will be answering questions like: How did the structure of the story change in the course of revision? Why/how did the message of the story change? What aspects were redundant in the first draft? What aspects of the story sharpened in the revised draft? What narrative aspects the student found out to be her strength or weakness?

Submission Guidelines

Each submission must be typed, double-spaced, in 12 pt. font size, and in font style Times New Roman (preferably). You need to email your draft to class by listserv a week in advance of your workshop date. **Late submission is highly discouraged. You’ll lose ½ letter grade off your draft for each day’s delay.**

Workshop Guidelines

The writer *must be present* during the workshop date. If you realize that you'll be absent for any reason then notify me well in advance so that suitable rearrangements can be made. Also, the usual practice is that the class will critique the writer's work through open discussion. During this time the writer will take notes and prepare her response. In the end, the writer will speak, providing an overall response to the critique or asking for further clarification on certain comments.

The critics must submit their response to ReggieNet and **bring a hard copy to class**. Your response should be at least 150-words long, insightful and constructive.

Attendance

Your participation is crucial for the success of this class. So regular attendance is a must. Students will be excused from class only for university approved reasons: If you accrue more than **three absences**, excused or unexcused, then your FINAL grade will be negatively impacted.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism in no scale or form will be tolerated. Each work submitted to the class is expected to be student's original creation. By cheating or taking unfair help a student is undermining or abandoning original thinking this class intends to foster in him/her. For guidance regarding academic dishonesty policies and information on potential sanctions for violators of academic integrity, visit the following Web site:

http://www.deanofstudents.ilstu.edu/about_us/crr.shtml

Class Participation

I expect you to take class discussions very seriously. I expect you to read the assigned reading thoroughly, critically and engagingly. And I'll look forward to your insightful comments and observations for making the discussion lively and learning-oriented. You must frequently take part in the class discussions otherwise your class participation grade will be affected.

In-class Writing Exercises

Most of these exercises will come from the book *The 3 A.M. Epiphany* and **you must submit to me all the exercises scheduled for Thursdays and one exercise of your choice scheduled for Tuesdays**. You need to be resourceful and quick-witted to complete a **substantial portion** of these exercises within class time. You can bring your laptop to class to complete these exercises or you can use pen and paper, which later you need to type out. Submit your work through ReggieNet and expect grade in form of check+, check, or check- in a week's time. The purpose of these exercises is to develop creative skills in dialogue, description, characterization, pov etc. So students are encouraged to be self-sufficient and evaluate their own writing in these exercises. If you want detailed feedback from me in these exercises then please see me during my office hours.

Also, these exercises are meant to help you with story ideas. So feel free to develop your works in one or more of these exercises into a story for the class.

Portfolio

Your portfolio will be the revision of Story #2. Please accompany the fresh draft with a reflection piece on how the story changed from version 1 to 2. How did you negotiate the challenge? What

new aspects of craft you learned through this exercise?

And the portfolio will be due on Dec 11, 2012 by 6 p.m.

CLASS SCHEDULE

(This is tentative and it may change with prior email notification)

Be prepared to discuss the assigned readings on the indicated dates.

**Check the Textbook section to identify the initials used here.

	Tuesday	Thursday (Submit only in-class exercises of Thursdays to ReggieNet)
Week 1	Introduction; In-class Exercise on Biography in <i>AM</i>	Discussion of "Introduction" in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion "Fruit Series" in <i>3F</i> ; In-class Exercise on Images in <i>AM</i>
Week 2	Discussion of chapter "People" in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion of "Guests of the Nation" in <i>DR</i> ; In-class Exercise on Characters in <i>AM</i>	Discussion of chapter "Point of View" in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion of "Why You Shouldn't have Gone in First Place" & "Bullet" in <i>3F</i> ; In-class Exercise on Point of View in <i>AM</i>
Week 3	Discussion of chapter "Structure and Plot" in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion of story "Gustave" in <i>DR</i> & "Wallet" from <i>3F</i> ; In-class Exercise on Thought and Emotion in <i>AM</i>	Discussion on chapter "Description" in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion on story "Eveline" in <i>SS</i> & "The Paperboy" in <i>3F</i> ; In-class exercise on Description in <i>AM</i>
Week 4	Discussion on chapter "Dialogue" in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion on story "Hills Like White Elephant" in <i>SS</i> ; In-class Exercise on Conversation in <i>AM</i>	Discussion on story "The Voices from the Other Room" in <i>SS</i> & "Three Soldiers" in <i>3F</i> ; In-class Exercise on Conversation in <i>AM</i>
Week 5	Discussion on ethics/ representation "Coming Close to Donna" by Barry Hannah in <i>DR</i> ; "What is An Author" by Foucault in <i>DR</i> ; In-class exercise on Women and Men in <i>AM</i> ;	Discussion on your favorite story in <i>3F</i> that has not been discussed so far; Review on essential elements of flash fiction; Class time to work on flash fiction; ***All 18 must submit their works by

		12 AM Sunday
Week 6	Flash Fiction workshop (*9)	Flash Fiction workshop (9)
Week 7	Discussion on Scene, Summary & Flashback in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion on stories “In the Warehouse” and “The Bullet in the Brain” in <i>SS</i>	Discussion of story “Everything that Rises Must Converge” & “The Hortlak” in <i>DR</i> ; Class time to work on Story #1 ***The first 6 people must submit their works by 12 AM Sunday
Week 8	Workshop Story #1 (2*) Discussion of story “August 25, 1983” in <i>SS</i>	Workshop Story #1 (4) ***Next 6 people must submit their works by 12 AM Sunday
Week 9	Workshop Story #1 (2) Discussion of story “Crickets” in <i>SS</i>	Workshop Story #1 (4) ***Last 6 people must submit their works by 12 AM Sunday
Week 10	Workshop Story #1 (2) Discussion of story “To Build a Fire” in <i>SS</i>	Workshop Story #1 (4)
Week 11	Discussion on Voice and Style in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion on “That Could Have Been You” in <i>3F</i> & “Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines” in <i>DR</i> ;	Discussion on “Theme” in <i>CC</i> ; Discussion on “Pure Product” in <i>DR</i> ; Class time to work on Story #2 ***The first 6 people must submit their works by 12 AM Sunday
Week 12	Discussion on story “Sea Oak” in <i>DR</i> Workshop Story #2 (2)	Workshop Story #2 (4) ***Next 6 people must submit their works by 12 AM Sunday
Week 13	Discussion on story “Drown” in <i>DR</i> Workshop Story #2 (2)	Workshop Story #2 (4) ***Last 6 people must submit their works by 12 AM Sunday
Week 14	Thanksgiving Break	Thanksgiving Break
Week 15	Discussion on story “If I Told Him a Complete Portrait of Picasso” in <i>DR</i> Workshop Story #2 (2)	Workshop Story #2 (4)

Week 16	Discussion of chapter "Revision" in <i>CC</i> Work on revision of Story #2	Work on revision of Story #2
----------------	---	------------------------------

* Number of students to be workshopped.

----- **PORTFOLIO DUE DEC 11, 2012 BY 6 pm** -----

APPENDIX B

INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO STUDENTS FOR STORY #1 EXERCISE

Here are few examples of the constraints you can use:

- Lipogram (Not to use one of the alphabets at all; usually a vowel is chosen; Georges Perec's famous novel *A Void* is an example where he didn't use the vowel "e" at all)
- Without adjective (this is hard if you're a descriptive person; but the final effect will blow your mind)
- Without adverb
- No period (yes, a sentence that is 4-5 page long; it's doable. I have done it and many writers before me. No cheating though; don't replace a genuine period with semicolon)
- No comma (you usually end up with Hemingway-like prose; can't use dialogue in conventional format though)
- Increasing/decreasing sentence length (called "snowball effect," i.e. if the first sentence has 3 words, the next one will have 4, then 5, and so on)
- Each sentence with equal number of words (one of my friends did this with spectacular effect)
- Each sentence with equal number of characters (for the most daring!)
- Each sentence is a question

- First letter of each sentence forms the alphabet sequence (i.e. the first sentence starts with A, next B, then C, so on)
- Starting each sentence with a fixed letter
- End each sentence with a fixed letter (this can be bit tricky though)
- This exercise can be the prose version of acrostics (google the word for examples) i.e. the first letter of each sentence when put together makes a sentence/phrase by itself which could be a catch phrase or the title of the story or the theme. For example, if the catch phrase is “Color me blue” then first sentence starts with C, then O, all the way up to E (the last letter of the phrase) and then you start over again with C. But remember, to mark in **bold** the first letter of each sentence to signal to the reader the presence of the pattern.
- A constant word that repeats in each successive sentence with/without different connotations; no proper nouns though

These are only few examples; you can use one of them; modify them or invent one of your own. Please get my approval before you proceed.

Here is the key to tackle this assignment: It will be hard to come up with a conventional story with such restraint; you need to think out of the box (sorry for the cliché). The 500 word exercise restrained you at the global level, limiting your plot idea. Here, the challenge exists at the word level; **at the level of expression.**

I am not looking for a clear plotline, moral purpose, message. If you could give us that under restraint then great! But if not, then at least give us something COHERENT, perhaps ABSTRACT, but surely EVOCATIVE.

Remember, it'll be difficult and may provide enough reasons to make you distrust this exercise, but that does not mean you can't have fun.

APPENDIX C

REFLECTION PAPER PROMPT FOR STORY #1 AND
REVISION ASSIGNMENTS

Identify a passage or section in Story #1 where you think you did something NEW,
and respond to the following:

1. Quote the passage or section first. This does not count towards the page limit.
2. How does this excerpt help you in/prevent you from forwarding the plot of the story and conveying the theme?
3. What do you think of the voice/style in this excerpt? How does the prose sound to you? Think of prose rhythm, diction, flow, syntax etc.
4. What was your writing process in creating this passage? Think of preparation, execution, and revision.
5. How does this excerpt differ from your natural storytelling style?

Max 2 pages (excluding the quote), double spaced.

APPENDIX D

GUIDELINES FOR REVISION ASSIGNMENT

[These guidelines were shared with students by email. The language and formatting was kept informal and playful to encourage the spirit of experimentation and unconventionality among students for the revision exercise. And students' names are omitted below to protect their identities.]

1. you're needed to do a radical revision. it does not matter if the revision is successful. if it makes the original version better or worse, it does not mattterrrr....so what matters? what you'll be graded on? on your ability to experiment, to disturb the stability of the story you have now, and to try to alter its form radically.
2. what you need to keep of the older version?: a) the basic premise of the story. b) no new characters can be introduced, but characters can be omitted.
3. what can change?: a) what the characters represent b) what the story is about (the theme) c) voice, time, place.
4. page limit: 4+
5. most importantly, you can have only one scene. just one, comprised of continuous timeline OR single space.
6. examples: what if you already have continuous timeline like _____, _____, and

_____’s story? then pin it down to a single space. yes, i said it! confine your characters to one space; they can’t leave it until the end of the story. what if your story already has both the aspects like _____ and _____’s story? then break the chronological, conventional scene-style of the story. your objective is to have no scene. yes, break the story into fragments.

7. purpose? let me phrase the question in the style of my eng 101 student: well, Mr. Mishra, what’s the purpose of this exercise if there is no clear expectation of bettering the earlier version? well, tommy, good question. i am glad you raised it. let me put it to you in the style of my teacher, who once said, you’ve only written for teachers, peers, audience, et cetera, et cetera. but write for the story sometimes, write for its sake, write not to succeed. it’s actually an art.